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To
JOHN SUTHERLAND BOWMAN
with affection and esteem

Author's Note: None of the names used in this story refers to an actual person; none of the characters is based on that of any real person; none of the incidents described is real or true.

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"It was the riding that did it"

WILLIAM PALMER (a betting man
and poisoner) on hearing the verdict, 1855

CHAPTER I

"I only ask for Information."

—ROSA DARTLE.

HE looked a sufficiently martial figure as he parted from his khaki-clad companions and trudged away from the main road. However, Arnold Winterset was not an offensive warrior, but an unpaid, part-time defender of his country at a time when its regular forces were elsewhere engaged. The rifle slung on his shoulder was of a deadly pattern, but unloaded; the cartouches about his slim middle were all empty; except for the bayonet on his hip he was unarmed; he was off duty. He topped a rise and walked on briskly to the music of birds along a narrow lane above dew-wet green fields, the chalk downs to the north surmounted by an immense regiment of silver balloons—a phalanx defending London from the flying-bombs . . . he heard, somewhere ahead of him, the whine of an approaching car, driven fast, and he moved off the middle of the road towards the grass verge.

The car, a high-built saloon, rose in front of him and came on, up, and at him, at dizzy speed. Arnold knew the sharp panic common to all flesh-and-blood suddenly made aware of the immediate menace of violent contact with mechanized steel thundering in terrible omnipotence over a common right-of-way. . . . 'Madman!' he exclaimed mentally. Then panic turned to terror. That confounded car was coming right at him!

It was, indeed. . . .

Arnold was moderately battle-trained. The experience stood him now in excellent stead; he went across the grass verge in a flat sprawl, and sank billowingly from sight under the soft plumes of cow-parsley into a wide, deep, dry ditch; he heard the tortured scream of tyres braking ferociously on the very lip of his trench; the swaying bulk of the big car, glittering in the sharp and level sunshine, hung threateningly above him but did not descend; it passed, and he scrambled to his knees like a man in nightmare, screwing his head round over his shoulder to watch that violently mishandled machine going away from him, draggingly and broad-side to the road until, just before it capsized into the ditch on the

other side, it straightened, and slurred to a standstill. Arnold was still on his knees, still looking over his shoulder, when all four of its gleaming, dark-blue doors swung open, and four men in light cloth caps and new-looking tight clothes sprang out upon the deserted roadway.

"Get him!" one of them rapped out, running leggily towards Arnold, preceded by his own elongated shadow; he seemed to be tugging something from the side-pocket of his jacket. He reached Arnold first, and swung at his defenceless and surprised head a full-arm blow with a sort of short truncheon looped to his wrist by a thong of leather. Arnold's brain was positively stupefied with horror and amazement, but his limbs moved in spontaneous reaction to the promptings of instinct. He flung himself forward, grappling the man's legs, sinking his head between his arms as he did so. The man voluted over his shoulders and came down heavily on the point of his jaw, striking with a startlingly loud and yet muffled thud the good earth who is mother to us all, and who bore on her breast at this precise place a large, smooth boulder. . . .

The next instant, Arnold was up; he cleared the inert body in front of him with a flying leap, made across the road for the other ditch, jumped it, and was over the tall fence of weathered oak enclosing a belt of woodland before the reaching hands of the other three men could so much as touch him. As he slipped between close, uprising trunks of friendly elm, ash, and oak, he heard the unmistakable *whhit!* of a bullet quite near his head, and, almost simultaneously the *plopping* sound which his now fully active brain told him must be the noise made by a silencer fitted over the muzzle of a gun. He went quickly through the wood, crouching to avoid the whipping branches, moving with really very little noise compared with the crashing uproar made by his pursuers. He had no single idea what all this could possibly be about. He did not, however, propose stopping to enquire. It must, he dimly felt, be some sort of case of mistaken identity, but those determined persons behind him did not seem the sort likely to be persuaded that any course they had adopted was a mistaken one; they did not look susceptible to any kind of persuasion save that of force.

The wood formed a rough triangle bordered by two fields and by the side-road leading to his lonely cottage overlooking the deep cutting of a railway line. He knew its layout and its general relation to the meadows, woods and lanes surrounding his home;

he also knew its remoteness and the unlikelihood of there being about in the fields and orchards any workers whose attention he could attract; plainly, he dare not expose himself in the open until he was sure he was beyond range of shooting. . . .

He worked his way in sweating silence to the western end of the wood, remembering a hedge which joined it there and then ran off in a ragged and diminishing perspective alongside a field of sprouting green corn, three feet high at this season, and seven or eight acres in extent. If he could get into the wheat without being seen, he had hopes of worming his way at last to Pool Coppice, a stretch of broken, swampy ground interspersed with fine old oaks and reed-sprouting pools of shallow water likely to afford him excellent cover; from thence, with luck, he might attain his own lane—a mile-and-a-half above his cottage.

He stopped, close under a big tree, lifting with his bayonet—his rifle had been abandoned in the roadside ditch—the bracken and tangled briars obscuring his view through the timber down to the corner of the wheatfield. He saw, above the hedge bordering wood and field, a cloth cap moving slowly forward. He lay down at once, close to the ground and unstirring, but keeping the cloth cap in sight through a tunnel of greenery. Insects were beginning their song to the new sun.

After five slow minutes, the cap had passed along the line of the bottom hedge, had risen above it, disclosing a face which had peered cautiously into the woodland depths, and had then dropped again. Arnold judged that his enemies had divided and that this man was probably alone; he proceeded to crawl through the hot undergrowth until he had reached the hedge.

The fellow was some thirty yards to Arnold's left—and he was now on the wrong side of the cornfield fence. With great circumspection, and beginning to hope, even against hope, Arnold commenced to burrow through brambles . . . 'and I only wish,' ran his jumbled thoughts, 'that the Sergeant could see me now. . . .'

He had picked exactly the right place. Inside sixty seconds he had crawled, flat to the ground, over the narrow path and into the cool, green forest of wheat. A pleasant breeze stirred all growing things, and he thanked high Heaven for the fact. He made good but terribly exhausting progress now . . . boring his way stealthily across the field with frequent rests. He heard raucous, carrying shouts far ahead and far to one side of him.

A faint answering cry came from very far behind him. He tried to plot his position more exactly. He must be within forty feet of the high hedge protecting his left flank as he had advanced, slightly downhill, towards the Coppice. He decided to risk a look-round. Above the pale, bright sea of stirring green his dark eyes glanced swiftly about. The high hedge, black against the strengthening sun, was fifteen yards away on his left. He scurried from cover into the lee of it and ran hard down a narrow, stony path, bent double, to a stile at the bottom leading into the mingled light and shade of the Coppice.

The crossing of that stile was going to be tricky work, as it might expose him, however briefly, to the view of anyone watching; he slipped under the stile on his belly and wriggled with a thankful sigh over an earthen bank into the wet grass bordering a pool of water. And something went *whhit!* over his head and sang its way past him deep into the Coppice, cutting leaves and twigs as it went. . . .

Panic-stricken, Arnold rushed into the pool, breaking its mirrored surface into a thousand rings, scrambled out of it and ran as runs the hare, rejoicing in speed, fearful but confident. Twisting and turning, tripping sometimes but never falling, he crossed the Coppice and burst at last through a trimmed hedge, beyond which, blue-black and blessedly empty, lay the lane, his own lane. He paused outside a gate leading to a flower-edged path in front of a cottage door. The door opened, framing the tall, lean form of James Spink topped by a lean face, burned red from exposure; James was an extremely silent man. He watched Arnold with unspeculative and candid eyes. Somebody, behind the row of cottages, was whistling tunefully and making a great music of hammer-blows.

Arnold felt suddenly safe.

"Going along the road now, Jim?" he asked. "You might give me a lift to the corner."

"Certainly," answered Jim.

He turned at the side of the cottage, where a patient horse held up the shafts of a milkfloat. A few minutes later, leaning against the side of the cart beside Jim standing upright like a charioteer, Arnold came to a corner within a hundred yards of his own little house.

He swung down to the tarmac and Jim drove on. The next instant, standing there within view of his own honeysuckle-draped front porch facing the railway cutting, Arnold was startled

to see a man in blue serge, motionless by his gatepost, and looking away from him down the deserted road.

What could all this be about? No longer could he think it merely a case of mistaken identity—unless the mistake involved him in his capacity of owner-occupier of that little, remote cottage, furnished to his heart's desire with all he wanted in the way of material things in this world . . . who could need his death?

On that thought he dived across the road and under the friendly screen of tall elderberry bushes festooned with acrid blossom; not stopping, he made off beneath their cover to the foot of a stout fence protecting the steep descent to twin rail-tracks which stretched in a bright ribbon of steel, inflexibly straight, to their distant vanishing points. Arnold went down the slope on the seat of his regulation trousers, and plodded off determinedly along that metal highway supported by spaced sleepers resting on chips of granite. He was shielded from view now by the wall of the cutting—or he thought he was. . . .

He had set off to the right, to the west. Ahead of him the burnished track passed under a curved brick arch at the point where Arnold's lane turned to cross it. A platelayer's hut stood at the side of the line, with a thin thread of smoke from its stove ascending perpendicularly in mute witness to the fact that it was occupied, or soon would be. Nothing else moved in all his view of the world, confined now to the tidy, man-made permanent way enclosed in steep green banks—the hut, the bridge and, below the bridge, the line of the metals running perfectly true to an unimaginable distance, to infinity. Arnold deliberated with himself, as he approached it, whether or no he should turn the worn brass doorknob gleaming at him on the door of the hut, and seek advice or help; there was no telephone wire leading from that small, flat-roofed box of smoke-grimed masonry; once more he shrank from explanations which seemed now, in this peacefully secluded and utterly empty ravine, more difficult than ever. He passed the hut.

His uniform and accoutrements, he knew, franked him in thus violating the Act of Parliament which reserved to the Southern Railway the right of access to its roads. Patrol of sections of this railway, indeed, had been a part of his last night's duty. Why, in a small pocket on the front of his battledress trousers there reposed even now two of the tiny detonators, with clips of soft metal attached to them for turning over the T-shaped rail, by means of which he

was instructed if necessary to stop a train. He lifted his eyes, and there before him on the parapet of the bridge, and holding a gleaming weapon with a swollen end, was a man in a cloth cap. Far, far away, from the north, sounded the thin, remote whistle of a train, doubtless leaving Hurst Green Halt on the London line, which crossed this track at right-angles. . . . As that thought entered his mind, Arnold knew that he was saved—as long as the man on the bridge had nothing of longer range than a big revolver with which to shoot at him. He kept a wary look-out to the crest of the embankments on either hand, and proceeded calmly on his way.

He watched the man on the bridge, for the strong sunlight was full on his face; it was the man who had stood outside the gate of his cottage. He had crouched slightly, now, bringing his eyes level with the parapet, and the blue muzzle of his revolver shone dully on the top of the brickwork, a few inches in front of his nose. Accurate shooting with a revolver is almost impossible at a distance greater than fifty feet; Arnold would be just within range as he passed under the arch. A glimpse of a carelessly placed leg, beyond the arch, told Arnold that his pursuers meant to make certain of him in what no doubt they regarded as an ideal place for a quiet murder—remote, concealed, lighted by the broad light of day, and without any retreat; he threw a glance over his shoulder. The third man was slithering gingerly in his nice new suit down the embankment behind him—about sixty yards back. Arnold walked steadily on; he drew his bayonet and made extravagant cutting gestures with it as he walked.

It is a fact, and it was known to Arnold, that the direct line from London to Hastings and Eastbourne, via Eridge, crosses at almost a right-angle the line running east-west from Tonbridge to Guildford, and where this interesting conjunction takes place, the north-south line passes *under*, by means of a tunnel, the cutting made higher up the soft chalk hill by the minor line. . . . At the side of the track, on this upper line, low arches open upon the blackness of the tunnel, creating a sudden flash of surprising daylight in the gloom to startle south-bound passengers; Arnold stooped—under the very noses of his enemies, and while still thirty yards away from the road-bridge—he stooped, and disappeared.

He squeezed himself through the two-foot-high arch, hung a moment by his hands, and feeling for handholds on the grimy bricks, picked his way with all possible haste down the

sheer face of the tunnel wall, splaying his booted feet against the bricks to slow his slithering descent. He dropped after ten seconds to the floor, stepping at once sideways into the darkness, away from the yellow, dust-laden bar of vivid sunlight falling at his feet across the railway-track; he grinned to himself as he savoured the recollection of the ample, stabbing, slicing gestures he had made with his clean, bright bayonet. A moving shadow blurred suddenly the sunshine at his feet, and Private Winterset, realizing that these men could not know exactly to what extent he was armed, shouted in a powerful voice.

"Come on down, pal!" he cried to an accompaniment of musical echoes, "I'm waiting for you. One at a time, or all at once, just as you like. As soon as I hear you coming I'll put this hand-grenade down here, underneath you, with the pin out, and you'll go back up this hole a lot faster than you hope to come down, only in much smaller bits. If any of the bits are too big, I'll be happy to cut 'em up a bit smaller. *Come on!*"

The shadow vanished. A prolonged silence fell, during which Arnold calmly stooped and clipped one of his detonators over the railway line. Then he stood back, flattening himself against the wall of the tunnel. The silence was broken by a distant throbbing hum. The London train was coming south towards the tunnel.

"Hey, you!" called a thin voice above his head. Smiling in the darkness, Arnold made no reply.

"Yer gotter come aht o' that, some day . . . we'll be waitin' for yer—*pal!*" continued the remote voice in accents of unmistakable menace.

"Race-gang toughs!" softly exclaimed Arnold, visited by inspiration. . . . "But why *me*? Why ever *me*?"

The distant pin-point of daylight on which his eyes were fixed winked out like a dying star, and a growing uproar, a thunder of violent noise, assailed his ears as a stench of acrid smoke filled his nostrils. He saw the glare of red fire moving towards him along the roof of the tunnel in violent haste. The din became tremendous—it seemed to reach the limit of bearing, until it was surpassed by a detonation of sound that seemed likely to blow a hole in the arched ceiling over his head. A line of lighted carriages slid past him in the wake of a reeking, panting locomotive, and with great grinding and hissing a train came to a stop in front of him. Without hesitation, and feeling unjustifiably secure in his uniform of a king's servant, Arnold opened after some difficulty the door of a first-class compartment raised

several feet above his head, and clambered on his hands and knees, dusty, sooty, unshaven, and considerably dishevelled, into its interior. It was discreetly lighted, carpeted, grandly upholstered, and occupied by a highly astonished man smoking a briar pipe and gazing at Arnold out of very bright, very green eyes under a broad brow crested with black hair. This man took the pipe out of his mouth, revealing a chin of the jutting, clean-edged kind that seems to sprout out from under the ears and to keep going; it had a deep cleft in it.

"Good morning," said a musical voice with the faintest touch of a west Ireland brogue to it. "D'you mind shutting the door after you?"

"Not at all," murmured Arnold. He got to his feet, turned, shut the door, then sat down on the edge of the seat facing the black-haired man. "First-class, I see," he remarked inconsequently. "It doesn't matter, as I haven't a ticket anyway. Now, I suppose, somebody'll be along to find out what the train was stopped for?"

"It's more than likely, I should say," agreed the black-haired man politely. "What *was* it stopped for, may I ask? Urgent reasons of national defence, perhaps? Training, or something of that sort?"

"Not exactly," said Arnold, the mood of the confessional suddenly strong upon him as he took in that fighting chin, the steady green eyes, the broad brown hands grasping *The Times* newspaper. "More in the way of urgent reasons of personal defence. I don't know why, and I don't expect you to believe me for a moment, but four men in a saloon car tried deliberately to run me down, early this morning, and nearly succeeded. After that, they tried shooting me with a silenced revolver. They've been chasing me ever since. They nearly had me cornered just now. This was my only way of escape. When this train starts, take a look outside the tunnel. I bet you a pound you'll see 'em there, waiting for me to come out."

He to whom these words were addressed was very probably the shrewdest judge of truth in England. He went by tones of voice, by facial expressions, by all the signs that a great criminal lawyer learns to read in the tense strain on nerves engendered in the atmosphere of judicial enquiry. Sir Brian Dinsmore Conway, K.C., M.P., D.S.O., 13th Baronet, and Chief of Clonmally, believed every word of Arnold Winterset's startling tale. He elicited a few practical and immediate further facts, and was already

waiting at the corridor door, blocking the compartment from view, when an agitated guard came patrolling in search of information; he had, also, the foresight to pull down the blinds over the windows looking out upon the corridor.

"Here you are, guard," he called softly, and as the man came up: "Carry on. I take full responsibility. Matter of military necessity. Member of the Forces just joined me in my compartment. This was his only way of meeting me on this train. He had an official issue of detonators. Something to do with D-Day, probably. Oblige me by giving no information to anybody, will you—except in writing, and sealed, to your Superintendent of Traffic. There's my card. Enclose it with your report, and he'll no doubt get in touch with me."

This is no way to talk to guards, really. They have a standing, an importance, a dignity, a verbosity . . . yet, it worked. A crisp, five-pound note passed through the half-open door with the baronet's card, and the aged official (he would have retired three years ago but for the war) shuffled back to his lair and made the necessary motions for the restarting of the train. It had gathered but little speed by the time it reached the end of the tunnel, and in the hard, dazzling summer sunshine flooding the compartment Conway delightedly feasted his eyes on two men in cloth caps, lying in the grass at the side of the track, and idly watching the train slide slowly past them. One of them jumped to his feet, staring.

"Blast," remarked Conway, "they've seen you!"

Arnold, too late, flung himself back on the carriage seat, away from the window-pane to which his nose had been pressed. He grinned up at the barrister, who was lighting his pipe and regarding him with bright eyes over the flickering match and the thin clouds of blue-grey smoke.

"There's a car waiting for me at Heavenridge," Conway said. "Consider yourself under my protection till further notice. Now, tell me all about yourself. Everything. You know who I am?"

"I believe I've guessed," said Arnold. "You were singles champion of the world, at Wimbledon, weren't you? In the days when I played tennis myself—suburban tennis; your picture was in every paper in those days, apart from your big cases at the Old Bailey. . . ."

Conway nodded.

"Go on," he said softly. "Tell all,"

Arnold gulped, wondering how to begin. A few gentle, kindly questions set him off; Conway listened, very attentively.

. . . He had been working, very hard, at his London office for several days, during which he had not found it possible to get home to Heavenridge. He had, therefore, stayed with a friend, near Battersea Park. On the previous day he had set out thankfully for Kent, with a whole week's holiday in front of him.

"'Mornin', sir," had piped at him the elderly female person whose task it was to clean the front steps of his friend's block of flats. "That one larst night wasn't 'alf close, eh? Fell in the Park, sir. An 'ole no bigger'n what yer c'd put yer 'at in. All blarst, ain't they, sir? Deary me. Wot next, eh? Took all the leaves from the trees, it 'as, an' fair plucked one o' them pore swans on the lake."

Arnold had made suitable replies, anxious to detach his mind from flying-bombs. 'At least,' he thought, 'down in Kent I'm not at the receiving end, even if I'm in the very middle of Bomb Alley.'

He had proceeded directly to Victoria Station, showed his season ticket, placed his bag on a seat in an empty compartment, purchased tobacco, and composed himself to wait with patience for his train to start; looking through the window on the platform side, he was rather startled to see old Ranaldshaw, his employer, creeping along the platform at his habitual laboured gait inflicted on him by acute muscular rheumatism. Nobody in Heavenridge knew that Arnold worked for old Ranaldshaw. He liked to separate entirely his working-life in London from that other existence where, in bachelor neatness and rural seclusion on a little lane overlooking the railway, his tiny cottage awaited him (peeping through trees, separated from the lane by a wasteful six-foot-wide ditch drowned in cow-parsley, hawthorn and dog-rose, sleepy with bee-song . . .).

Arnold was not a rich man. At the age of thirty-two years he had built for himself from tiny beginnings a place in the shifting world of London commerce as perfectly commensurate with his worth as nearly all such dependent positions tend to be; he was secretary to a turf commission company by virtue of his acknowledged professional standing as a chartered accountant and of his admirable zeal, exactitude and unswerving integrity; the company reimbursed these valuable contributions to its activities with an annual salary of £725; a Government urgently occupied

with the prosecution of total war allowed him tax-free out of his monthly portions, first, an annual amount of 10 per cent because he had, after all, earned the money, and next £80 as a personal allowance to Arnold for the great love they bore him; that makes £152 10s. Of the remaining £572 10s. they then taxed the first £165 at the rate of 6s. 6d. in every pound, making £53 12s. 6d., and all the rest at an exact, equivocal half, making a further £203 10s. After these deductions totalling £257 2s. 6d. Arnold thus received the sum of £467 17s. 6d., almost exactly nine pounds a week. Although it is true that Arnold had earned by his efforts, under what is mistakenly called a free competitive system almost exactly £14 a week, things were not so bad as they might at first sight seem, for the Government had also provided that he should find but little in the shops to buy, nor find that little oft; balm to his nerves and solace to his discontents such as his beer and his tobacco they prodigiously taxed again to the extent of six-sevenths of the price he paid; they taxed his tea and sugar; they set a huge purchase tax on everything he might want to buy, almost—supposing it had been on sale; bread they left untaxed, lest he and his like should perish of inanition and bring the monstrous tower of their financial scheming down into the dust.

He was an accountant, and a very good one. He planned his expenditure in accordance with the facts of his situation. He spent two pounds on the rent, upkeep and provisioning of his cottage, about a pound on fares for the twenty-five-mile journey to London and back, daily, and the rest on saving, clothes, food and books. He was unable to see how he could get married. His office work he found interesting. He liked old Ranaldshaw well enough, and he had got on very well at the office with old Ranaldshaw's nephew, who was likely to inherit the business and other interests of his uncle, and though he had very little to do with the other partner in the firm, Samuel Coleridge Smallfield, a bluff, frank-spoken, good-hearted Yorkshireman, he had received only kindness and courtesy from him on such occasions. . . .

Arrived at the little Kentish station, Arnold had climbed a short slope of main road and came up to a long, low inn bearing a signboard on which was depicted in uncertain lineaments an aquatic, once-white bird afloat upon unmi-takable water and with the altogether unambiguous words THE DUCK lettered above it in enduring gold. There were two doors. One said SALOON, the other said PRIVATE. It is, of course, a rule of right living in England that in little country inns you do not use the saloon

bar, as in London. You use the public bar (appropriately labelled "private" in many cases. These are niceties to which only naturalization and prolonged residence can accustom the foreigner). Arnold pushed open the door, stooped his head, and entered a low-ceilinged space about six feet square with a dark cubby-hole in front of him, a bar with beer-pumps on his left, and a spacious room on his right. There was a faint haze of tobacco smoke, murmurous waves of low, deep-toned talk, the scrape of hobnails on plank floors, and a recurring chink of glassware. A side-wall of the cubby-hole opened on to the bar, wherein certain cave-dwellers, fond of hushed colloquy, huddled in their gloom and peered out at him as he entered.

"'Morning!" chorused many voices. Arnold returned these greetings, went to the bar, and addressed a rubicund man in a brown pullover who presided over the beer-handles.

"'Morning, William," he said. "Might I have a fullish pint of mild-and-bitter, please?"

"It could be done," said William guardedly. Arnold took his tankard into the large room. Ted Caper, standing on a brass mark in the floor with darts in his hand, turned a steady gaze from blue eyes on Arnold, saying no word. Tom Bolton smiled at him cheerfully; James Spink stood by the mantelpiece with one hand in a pocket of his moleskin trousers and the other holding a pint glass of golden cider.

Crack-crack-crack-crack-crack! went a Bofors gun just behind the inn, making every window rattle and every beer-glass utter musical chimes. People outside the hostelry at once instinctively crowded in, for cover, while people inside instinctively crowded out, to see. Arnold, with his cronies, Tom Bolton, Ted Caper and James Spink, watched the lazy, dirty-looking puffs of anti-aircraft smoke floating overhead; then came a tremendous utterance of gunfire, and the high, idiot, bubbling roar of the fly-bombs, going over like scalded cats, heading six abreast for the balloon barrage at the end of the straight Roman road running past the pub due north to London.

"'Ere come the Spitfires!" shouted someone, and in a splendid symphony of deep-toned engine-noise a broad-winged grey shape flashed above them and was gone.

"Tempest," said James Spink, who could carry on complete conversations in single words to which was attached a wealth of authoritative emphasis derived from the twin facts that he was never wrong and that he never went back on them.

They returned to the inn.

"Did you see who went up the road just now?" asked Ted Caper, expertly rolling a cigarette. "Old Ranaldshaw, the bookie. I heard his house was being opened again. Wasn't that Charlie Todd that met him with the car?"

"Yes," said James Spink.

"The old man better keep on the right side of Charlie," said Tom Bolton. "Old Charlie don't like him much, although he's chaufferin' him."

"Charlie Todd?" asked Arnold, conjuring a vision of a red-faced, grey-haired ex-soldier private of the local Home Guard, an amiable, blasphemous and uncannily successful player of pon-toon-games on a spread blanket by the light of candles on duty nights.

James Spink uttered a monosyllabic laugh, watching Ted.

"Yes," said Ted, picking up his beer. "You wouldn't remember, Arnold, that colt he ran, over at Lingfield year before last?" ("Oh, wouldn't I, though," thought Arnold.) "All very secret it was, but we knew, in here, that something was in the wind, see? Spike Brown, the Derby jockey, was staying at Gallop Mile, old Tom Clarke's place, and there were two real 'osses in the stables up there. Not hacks, you know—race-'osses. We sort of wondered."

He gazed steadily at Arnold from under the brim of his cap.

"Ah," said Arnold, "you wondered."

"Yes, we wondered. One of them 'osses was Golden 'Eels, second favourite for the Derby, year before, though he only ran tenth. And odds-on, o' course, at Lingfield. A cert. What's *called* a cert," he added with the caution of a man who regularly compiled his little gambles with skill and thought, and rarely lost his money. "Well, Spike Brown came in here for a drink night afore the race. Very merry, he got. But you never see a man so close. Drink or no drink. We waited. Didn't we wait?" he appealed to the others.

"We waited," said Tom Bolton, "till ten minutes to closing-time. Not wantin' to rush 'im, like. And then old William closed the pub, and we all stayed inside as quiet as mice. And all that little man would say was 'Golden 'Eels! Nothing of his class in the race!' As if we never knew *that*."

"What you really want," said Ted Caper reflectively, "in backin' 'osses, is Information. Information can be worth pounds. I don't say the stable always knows who's goin' to win, but I do

say the stable knows when it's In with a Chance, see? I only ask for Information . . . well, this Spike Brown wasn't giving any. 'Put 'im to bed,' I says to old William, 'e's in no state to get up the road to Gallop Mile, day before a big race. Put 'im to bed. I'll 'elp 'im upstairs,' So I did, and put him to bed as pretty as a picture, like a baby in his cot. Last thing I said before I blew out his little candle was to ask him, straight, what was goin' to win that race. 'I know,' I says, 'you got one to beat Golden 'Eels!' 'That's right, Edward,' 'e says. 'It's the one I'm ridin' meself. What a goer! Name of Spoof!' And with them words," concluded Ted, at last getting his cigarette alight, "'e drops straight off to sleep."

"When Ted come downstairs," said Tom Bolton, "we was all waitin' in the bar, in the dark, too excited to drink. More like a prayer meetin'."

"It was a proper job, that was," said Ted. "We was all in it. We never laid a bet within ten miles of 'ere, none of us. And next day, a Saturday, we all went to Lingfield. We was as mum as measles. When the race comes on Golden 'Eels is 5 to 2 on, there's two or three runners at sevens or eights, and this Spoof is at tens."

He puffed his cigarette.

"Tens," he said, "is a very nice price. I don't ask anything better than tens, myself. But three minutes before the off, that colt is at threes. At the off, he was at evens—to beat Golden 'Eels! You never saw such scenes. They come to the gate and there was Spike Brown on that bay colt, and the colt got away from 'im and ran three-quarters of the course before they got him to the start. Ran away from Spike Brown! They ran the race and Spoof was beaten a neck—after doing six furlongs more than Golden 'Eels! I thought old Charlie was a-goin' to do a murder—in public."

"Funny," remarked James Spink with an air of applying that epithet judicially, and after profound deliberation with himself.

"But why did Charlie want to murder old Ranaldshaw?" innocently asked Arnold.

"'E didn't, not then. 'E wanted to kill Spike Brown, slowly if possible, and eat 'im, trussed, for 'is dinner. But later, we learned old Ranaldshaw owned *both* 'osses. . . ."

A slow, dry pattering sound floated through the inn window open to the smiling Saturday noon. Faces were turned to the roadway outside as a procession of leggy horses walked proudly,

tossing with coquettish motions their big heads and moving their quarters with unction, past the inn, bearing their riders aloft above ordinary mortals like kings, like queens, like conquerors. The jingle of metal, the clean *clop* of iron on tarmac, a mutter of talk and muted feminine laughter, floated to their ears as Tom Clarke's house-party from Gallop Mile went up the road.

Charlie Todd came round the side of the building. His impudent bright glance flashed up at the seven riders led by Tom Clarke, Officer Commanding the local platoon of the Home Guard. Tom Clarke returned with a graceful horseman's salute of his crop the half-military gesture made by Charlie Todd; at his side rode a laughing girl with a swept-back mane of carrotty hair, her head turned over one shoulder to talk to a black-browed, big man sitting his steed like a centaur, at whose side was a plump, bowler-hatted lady; then came a dark girl, all in black, smooth cloth, outlining full breasts, a narrow waist, and broad, bony hips; a man exactly like any cartoonist's drawing of a hen-pecked husband sat an enormous grey with competent ease—he was, of course, a retired General of fantastically high personal courage, a knight and a magistrate . . . two other riders, a youth of perhaps seventeen and a girl of not more than sixteen, completed the cohort of persons staying with Tom Clarke as paying guests or taking riding lessons under his skilled tutelage.

"Who's the bloke with a face like Basil Rathbone?" asked Arnold, studying the straight back of the burly, blackavised man.

"He's James de Forrest Fosdyke, he is," said Ted Caper. "Known in these parts as J.F.F. Great hunting man before he joined up—must be demobbed, or on leave. A great one for the girls. But a good sort."

"Remember when Lord Mump'n'ham closed the path through the Park?" asked Tom Bolton, with relish. "Old J.F.F. come up here on a Saturday morning with a three-ton lorry and drove a lot of us up to where the old gate useter be, handed us pliers, and we all went through, cuttin' 'is Lordship's wire all to ribbons to reopen the right o' way."

"Makes you wonder how old J.F.F. manages to get on with all the toffs round 'ere," remarked Ted.

"There ain't no love lorst," startlingly screamed a deaf, clean old man occupying by tenant-right a particular chair in the corner, "atween 'em. There ain't no love lorst, not a mite, there ain't, not a tittle, not a jot."

"Between 'oo, Granpa?" asked Tom Bolton civilly.

"Atween Mas'r Fosdyke an' that old Ranalshmshmsmshmsm . . ." was the reply, ending ignobly. Persons proffered handkerchiefs, and aid, and the ancient resumed without further mishap.

"Michaelmas a two-year back," he gave out in his thin, sustained scream of a deaf old chap, "when that old Mas'r Ranaldshaw 'e' ad those old 'osses of 'is a-runnin' to Lingfield, Mas'r Fosdyke lorst a packet, a fair packet, lotter money, a *packet*, 'e lorst."

This was history sufficiently recent for the old fellow's highly revered memory of the remote past to count for very little, and men stared their disbelief. Granpa proved once more, however, that anything done or said in the fields or woods of the English countryside is, practically, done publicly: someone always sees, or somebody always hears. . . .

"Rare ol' row, they 'ad, oh, a rare ol' row, over to Pool Coppice, one marnin', they're breathin' their 'osses, by the rail-fence, out a-ridin'," said Granpa all in a rush. "'Sixty thousand pounds,' 'e roars, 'sixty thousand pounds! Sixty thousand golden pounds—why,' 'e says, 'I'll do murder, arson, rape and robbery,' 'e says, 'fer sixty thousand pounds!' I rimimbered the amount," said the aged man, blinking at the roar of appreciative laughter greeting his tale. (The automatic calculating machinery which lived in Arthur's dark-haired bony head clicked swiftly over that astounding sum of money . . . odds to six thousand, that would be, at the best price ever quoted for Spoof—no, he could never have got it on just before the start, and if he'd done it earlier, Spoof would never have been at ten to one on the course; sixty thousand pounds!)

"'Oo said that, then, Granpa?" asked Tom Bolton, setting down a pint of old-and-mild before the old gentleman.

"Thank ye, Mas'r Bolton, bor, thank ye, thank ye, bor," said the ancient. "Why, Mas'r Fosdyke said 'un. 'E said un. I 'eard un. That's 'ow 'twas, sure-ly. Murder, 'e said, an' arson, 'e said, an' rape, 'e said, an' robbery, 'e said, fer sixty thousand pounds!"

"Lot of money," remarked a deep, ruminative voice somewhere in the room.

"Crikey," said Ted Caper, "it is that. Damned if I don't play you darts for sixpence, Tom, arter that. . . ."

They played until William came in at 2.30 uttering the time-worn phrase, collecting glasses as he moved round the room; "I like your company, gentleman," he said, "but I don't like your hours. . . ."

It was at five minutes after eight that evening that Arnold made rendezvous with his platoon, again at the Duck. The place was crowded with shuffling khaki-clad figures, and overcoats and small arms lay in every corner of the room and bar. There was a quite normal night of guard-duty before them. They had tramped off up the road to the small village institute which was their platoon headquarters, as a mellow gloaming descended on the scattered cottages of the village where cheerful lights were just springing up behind the window-panes before the black-out screened them.

. . . Arnold, sitting in the railway compartment with Sir Brian Conway, after giving a brief account of himself and his way of life, was vaguely puzzled by the barrister's insistence on a faithful account of conversations and events of that night that had passed without incident.

"If it's *not* just a case of their mistaking you for someone else," Conway pointed out, "then they think you've seen something, or heard something, that they are determined you shan't have a chance to divulge. Doesn't that seem the likeliest explanation?"

"The likeliest explanation," said Arnold, "is that it *is* a case of mistaking me for someone else. I haven't been out of the company of other people since I arrived at Heavenridge yesterday morning. I've not been alone with any one other person, all that time. How could I have learned anything?"

"Umm. Yes. I don't suppose they're trying to rub out all the other members of your Home Guard platoon," said Conway. "There was nothing in London?"

Arnold shook his head. The train was slowing for Heavenridge Town station.

"We'll get into my car, outside," said Conway, standing up, "and talk for a little longer, before we go on . . . I must be sure. You must cudgel your brains, to coin a phrase. Think over every detail of the night. I am sure it must be something in the night—unless it's something in the books at your office? You say you've been working late, and alone, for some days. . . ."

"There's nothing there," said Arnold confidently. They climbed out of the train at a small country station, negotiated Arnold's passage from the platform, and emerged, their shadows

long before them in the bright morning, upon a cleared space used as a car-park in front of the station removed some distance from the tiny town—which itself was over a mile from Arnold's cottage facing the other railway line, to the north.

Among the vehicles ranked before them was an enormous Mercédès-Benz, open to the weather. Arnold relaxed in the front seat next to Conway, who sat in the sunshine, calm and patient, waiting for his companion to go over in his mind the details of the night's patrol. . . .

"I think I've got something," said Arnold slowly, at last. "Perhaps. I don't know. And I certainly didn't mention it to anybody—and I don't think the others noticed."

"Go on," said Conway, quietly.

. . . The Hall had been blacked-out and gas-lit, as usual. Zealous infantrymen were unlocking chests of ammunition; others were adjusting their equipment in readiness for parade; others hunted stocks of packet-tea and cartons of sugar, and were setting water to boil in a great cauldron over a gas-jet. Sergeant Coombe, tall, high-nosed, quietly authoritative, went from group to group, his hands full of papers, his pencil busy. Corporals attitudinized in the manner of corporals in every army of the world; lance-jacks, who included in their number Tom Bolton, wearing a Mons star and ready to the last gaiter-strap, stood still, as befitted men who had soliered in their time in the deadliest earnest and knew the value of repose and that brief mortality which is man's little life. A car purred outside.

"Attend to Tom, somebody," called the sergeant, and a fussy corporal clattered from the room to meet outside his officer—the tall, reserved, dryly humorous, grey-moustached Tom Clarke, of Gallop Mile. In a little side-room he colloqued with his sergeant after the immemorial custom of the Army . . . the nonsense went on . . . markers in position, men all over the room coming crashingly to attention, shouldering weapons, shoving and shuffling into lines, coming to attention, dressing by the right, standing at ease, coming again to attention, answering their names with "Sir!" or "Sergeant!" uttered in every key and volume and according to whether, at the precise instant of replying, their officer was in the Hall or not.

Lieutenant Clarke opened his weekly exordium.

"Well, chaps, you know the job. There's nothing new in orders tonight. The Sergeant will give out the patrols. If anything's seen or anything happens while we're on the job, well, we shall know what to do. Right-oh. Carry on, Sergeant."

More by-play followed in a style worthy of the Brigade of Guards, if not with quite the assured ease of finish proper to Wellington Barracks. Men then queued up and loaded themselves each with forty rounds of rifle ammunition and two live grenades, as well as more specialized fuel such as Sten-ammunition, and rail-detonators. The first patrol clumped out, subsistence allowances were paid, palliasses and blankets were issued, men divested themselves of their diverse impedimenta of equipment and settled down to gamble, talk, eat, or sleep. And at half past ten o'clock a patrol consisting of Tom Bolton (in command), Ted Caper, Charlie Todd, James Spink and Arnold Winterset filed into the bright summer night.

"No smokin' till I give yer the word," said Corporal Bolton, and led them off the main road, over fields, in the direction of the wide acres of Gallop Mile, bathed in white moonlight. Within ten minutes they were squatted, in a row, each propped against a yielding birch tree, all protected by a plentiful screen of leafage, and smoking peacefully in occasional quick puffs at cigarettes carefully held in cupped hands.

"Just the night for Lieutenant bloomin' Snitch to come a-prowlin' arter us," said Charlie Todd, comforting his cold fingers with the warmth of eighty-four copper coins gleaned from unwary fellow Home Guards during the last hour.

"We'll see the blighter first," said Corporal Bolton. "From this spot we survey our terri-tory. O' course, orders is to blunder about on them stony paths makin' an 'ell of a row an' visible for miles around. That's the Army. . . ."

They conversed in whispers.

"Douse fags," said Tom Bolton.

Cigarettes out, they waited. A stone clattered fifty yards away to the right.

"There 'e goes," said Tom. "'E's on the edge of the chalk-pit. Thinks we're 'idden in there. Come on."

They vanished, dispersing on the night. Arnold found himself moving delicately down the hill towards the chalk-pit, under the impenetrable shadows of the hedge.

.

"And that," he said to Conway, "is the only time I've really been alone, you know, in all the last twenty hours. I watched Major Dominic and a Lieutenant Rich—popularly known as Snitch for obvious reasons connected with a certain nosiness he's noted for—coming together up the field. (They'd been nowhere near the chalk-pit.) I knew that Tom's idea would be to challenge them as soon as they reached the trees, in order to try and scare the lives out of 'em. I walked on, to the edge of the chalk-pit. I saw a car down there. I went nearer, and pretty soon I recognized it. It belongs to old Ranaldshaw's nephew's wife. Tall, dark girl, with a shape. Well, as I'd seen her that morning, out riding with Tom Clarke's party, I thought she was probably staying at Gallop Mile. No business of mine that her car was parked in a lonely chalk-pit, late at night. I may say she has a certain reputation. Then I saw there was someone sitting in the back seat, with his head thrown back against the rear window. He looked fast asleep, as far as one could tell in the moonlight. It was John Cumber, the old man's nephew."

"The lady's husband?" said Conway.

"Yes. He works in the business—sort of second-in-command. It shook me, seeing him there."

"Why, particularly?"

"Well, it was her car, you see. And they've been totally estranged for over two years. She's supposed to be a fast piece. She certainly looks it—but you never can go by looks. Or can you? The story is that they hate each other like poison. And there he was, asleep in her car, you see, at the bottom of a chalk-pit, at midnight. I said to myself, right out loud, 'This is a rum go . . . I don't think I'll say a word about this, to anybody,' and the next moment Ted Caper lets out a bull's bellow you could have heard on Crockham Hill. 'H-A-A-LT! WHO GOES THERE!' Nearly a hundred yards away. I knew he'd found Major Dominic and Lieutenant Snitch, on the prowl. They're always trying to catch us out, those two. Well, that's all, I think. We finished our patrol, reported back, had a hot drink, turned in, and dismissed at the usual time. I left the Hall about half past five. . . ."

"I think," said Conway, "we're on to something."

He leaned forward, pressing the starter-button. Immediately there was a soft sighing, from eight cylinders in line. Conway set the car very gently in motion, and they moved down the station approach slowly and with almost no sound. At the end, where the main road crossed the station road at right-angles, the big car

slowed . . . Gallop Mile, and the Duck, and Arnold's cottage, all lay up to the right. A big, blue saloon car was turning in towards the station, however, from the left, and was blocking the right-hand turn. At sight of it, Arnold slid gently into the scuttle, below the dash.

"That," he murmured, crouching on the floor, "is them."

At sight of Conway, and perhaps realizing instantly that it had been the intention of the man at the wheel of the giant Mercédès to turn behind him and to the right, the driver of the blue saloon, a pale-faced fellow in a peaked cap, brought his car to a stop. Conway turned, at once, to the left, through Heaven-ridge High Street, noting with a brief glance into his driving mirror that the blue saloon had backed up, had straightened out, and was now coming up fast behind him.

"Begins the fun," he faintly intoned, curving round a hay-wain outside the open door of the George Inn, and putting down slowly and firmly his right foot, half-way to the floor. A wind whistled about his ears.

"If you can call it fun," said a disapproving voice from near his left knee. "Personally, I prefer Ludo, and suchlike clean games. Do remember they have guns."

"'Had I had guns, as I had goods, to work my Christian harm,'" happily quoted the 13th Baronet, "'I had sent him up from his own main-deck to trade with his own yard-arm.' Very appropriate. This is pure piracy—on the 'high road'—1944 version!"

CHAPTER II

"Something will come of this. I hope it mayn't be human gore."

—SIMON TAPPERITT.

THE road ran straight but very narrow.

"There's not a lot of use," said Conway, "having a hundred and twenty miles an hour under the bonnet if you haven't a road under your wheels you can do more than eighty on. . . ."

The blue saloon was keeping them comfortably in sight, though when once they had flashed, over a narrow bridge, out of the town, it had certainly not gained anything. Presently Arnold sat up, looking apprehensively forward, not backward. He muttered something about a bend to the right; Conway grasped his meaning just in time and brought the Mercédès round that corner, but in a highly perilous fashion; the road straight on led, said Arnold, into a maze of twisting by-roads. Conway, swinging the long machine round the two semi-circular curves of a genuine S-bend, remarked that for twisty by-roads this would be enough for the present, without the maze. He kept the car going hard, fairly confident that her greater stability on the bends and her truly phenomenal acceleration would gain them some yards on every such occasion. They ran past a common, with washing hanging on communal clothes-lines, and goats grazing; the road was straight there and Arnold reported the blue saloon still in sight as they left that hamlet behind them and embarked on another series of curves and switch-backs which brought them to a triangle of green, a crossroad and a public house, the Plough.

"Right!" called Arnold, amazed that it was not at all necessary to yell. In a few minutes more they had flashed through a village with a school, and then found themselves on a real stretch of straight—all straight, and more than a mile long. Conway pushed his foot down and the keening of the wind about the low bonnet and at the edges of the windscreen heightened to a penetrating whistle above which Arnold for the first time heard the soft roar of the engine drinking great draughts of air into four

carburettors. The speedometer needle said ninety-five, and they had leapt across two full miles in just over a minute before it became necessary to throttle down for a curve, up and over a low, wooded hill. Just before they left that piece of straight, Arnold looked through binoculars back along the way they had come, and reported the saloon just swimming into focus . . . they were a mile-and-a-half ahead. Chimneys and roofs peeped through trees.

"Where's this?" asked Conway.

"East Grinstead," said Arnold. "You'll be in Sussex in about ten seconds. You've already crossed a corner of Surrey. If the springs'll take it, I should swerve into this rough road, on your right, and get on the Eastbourne road, north of East Grinstead. That would bring us back to Lingfield again, and so home. To bed," he added.

Conway swerved. It was an exceedingly rough road, and to stay at the wheel at all it was necessary to slow down to a crawl. They went past a long line of woods, debouched on a residential street, and arrived at the main road; as Conway nosed the car forward, a policeman in blue stepped forward with a raised hand.

"What's this? We can't have been doing more than twelve miles an hour back there," exclaimed the dismayed baronet. "Or has some fool policeman telephoned?"

"It looks to me like a petrol check-up," said Arnold. "There's a war on. Dear me, I hope the nice policemen stick around when those razor-boys arrive."

Conway showed his papers to a diffident constable, who turned them about in his hands with maddening slowness as if he could read only with great difficulty. Both men in the car could now hear the saloon's familiar purr behind them. Neither looked round. The policeman did, stepping back two paces and bestowing a long, indifferent look upon their enemies.

"Excuse me, sir," he observed quietly to Conway, and walked away with the papers, which as far as Conway was aware were in perfect order . . . except for the slight question attaching to the presence of an unauthorized passenger, in the person of Arnold. Deliberately damping his rising Irish choler, Conway began to invent reasons for Arnold's necessary presence in the Mercédès.

"I suppose," he said gloomily, "there's a bus-service to this place, from Heavenridge."

"Yes," said Arnold.

The young policeman returned, giving them now a very keen glance indeed.

"You say you are Sir Brian Conway?" he asked.

"I certainly do," said Conway promptly.

The policeman continued to stare, moving his underlip slowly out.

"I'm very sorry," he said, "but I don't accept that. I must detain you."

"Detain . . . !" The famous barrister found that words would not come for a strangled half-minute. Swallowing, he said, with remarkable mildness: "Look here, constable, I don't know what damned game those fellows behind there are up to—or what yarn they've spun you—but allow me, please, to know my own name, and to go about my own business. I'll trouble you to return those papers, *at once!*"

While these words were being uttered, Arnold had time to notice that a solidly built and red-haired sergeant of constabulary, summoned by a gesture of the constable, had walked past their halted car without giving it a glance, and had spoken, stooping with astonishing depths of deference conveyed by his ample, navy-blue posterior, to the driver of the saloon car. This sergeant now returned with slow and heavy footsteps and gazed at Conway out of magnified eyes, blowing lightly the while through a sort of curtain of soft red hair on his upper lip.

"Leave this to me, kiddy," he murmured in the Sussex idiom, and the constable, after a slight glance at his superior conveying the slightest hint of amused scorn, stepped back, thrusting his thumbs into a broad belt of black leather—for all the world as if he were a real London policeman.

"We've no objection, sir," suavely said the sergeant, looking now past Conway at Arnold with an expression of countenance such as would not have been out of place on the whiskered face of an auburn sea-lion about to bend low a thick red neck to pick up in one giant bite a juicy, stranded salmon, "to your—er—pro-ceeding. It's this chap aside of you as Scotland Yard is after. No doubt you've given 'im a lift, sir—not knowin' 'oo 'e may be? P'raps," he added, like a man struck with a sudden good idea, "'e's been imposin' on yer, with 'is tales?"

"—," softly exclaimed Sir Brian Dinsmore Conway, beginning to get out of his large, low conveyance, purchased in pre-war days as the supreme instrument available to him, no expense spared, for rapid transit by road, and bogged now in this

official swamp of ineptitude, "where d'you get this Scotland Yard stuff? Hey? Are you deaf, copper? Don't I know every second man on the Flying Squad, personally? Are you telling me that those race-gang rowdies, razor-slashers to a man, even *look* like the Yard? Do they *sound* like the Yard? You can cut their Brighton-and-Stepney accents with a blunt knife. My scanty patience runs thin, Sergeant, boyo. Bring 'em here! I'll Scotland Yard 'em!"

Arnold Winterset's nerves were now in a sorry state. He had been up since dawn, and had gone through much. Tears almost rose to his dark eyes at Conway's emphatic assertion of faith in him. The sergeant turned back to the saloon car, and a moment later the man with the black-jack, the man who had aimed that devastating blow at Arnold in a lonely lane early that very morning, was looking into Conway's burning eyes with a calm, smiling glance. He raised a hand, and lightly touched the peak of his tweed cap.

"Good morning, Sir Brian," he said in a smooth, low, public-school voice. "I'm Saunders, of the Yard. Here are my papers, sir. The Sergeant has scrutinized them. I assure you everything is in order. You gave us a rare chase, sir. We had instructions to pick up that man—we've been after him ever since he came off duty. Case of embezzlement, Sir Brian. He's an accountant employed by Ranaldshaw's Limited, the big London book-makers."

"I'm sorry, officer," said Conway at once, with his winning Irish smile, "I've obviously been badly led up the garden. He told me a widely different tale. Of course, you must take him. Let me have those papers of mine, Sergeant, will you? Thanks!"

He leaned a negligent right hand over the side of the car, accepted his driving-licence, certificate of insurance, and petrol permit, and also a document on blue paper issued by the Special Branch, Scotland Yard, and glanced at them casually.

"Unpleasant business," he murmured, touching the starter button and inducing a muffled roar from the engine by pressing the accelerator pedal lightly up and down, up and down; his right hand nicked the gear-lever silently into first while his left foot held out the clutch. "Well, this is the end of the road, Mr.—er—Winterset," he said. "This is where you get out. I suppose you'll go quietly, what?"

The young constable, at a sign from Conway's raised left

hand, walked across the front of the car to the nearside door, and the moment he was clear of the immense silver-gleaming nearside front headlamp Conway lifted the revolutions of his engine to about 1500 per minute and took his foot off the clutch. Arnold Winterset, subjected without the slightest warning to the astonishing experience of being shot forward from a standstill to sixty-five miles an hour in eleven seconds, went over the back of his seat and capsized into the rear compartment of the huge Mercédès, as, with supercharger cut in, it howled northward along the London-Eastbourne road at a speed of nearly two miles a minute. . . .

Such a speed requires a concentration of the faculties. Conway, his famous fighting jaw very prominent and his mouth, so recently curved into a seductive smile, very grim indeed, said nothing. Very soon he was forced to slow by the appearance a half-mile ahead of a large Army truck proceeding in the same direction—this in response to the formula that braking distance increases as the *square* of increased speed, from a theoretically perfect minimum of 30 feet, at 30 miles an hour . . . work it out for yourself.

"Please," said Arnold, from the back seat, "they're coming after us."

"Are they, begod," muttered the baronet, edging out to try and glimpse the road beyond the truck; a car was coming towards them; it seemed to leap at them, although its startled driver was travelling at a modest twenty-five miles per hour only, bent on conserving his meagre petrol-ration. The car whistled past them. The Mercédès snaked up behind the truck, which was marked with a large white star.

"Please," said Arnold, "they're gaining."

"Good," murmured Sir Brian.

"There's two of 'em now," remarked Arnold.

"Oh," said Conway, with a quick stab of compunction. Then, "Who's leading?" he asked.

"The blue car," said Arnold. "It seems faster than the police bus."

The Mercédès raced past the truck and down upon the New Chapel crossroad (where the Lingfield road makes an angle of almost exactly 45 degrees) like a shape of black doom. In his mirror Conway saw the blue saloon swing out past the truck . . . he watched the road like a cat . . . it was clear ahead, and the wide space of unfenced grass beyond the fork gave, he judged,

ample room for manœuvre to that large, overbodied, oversprung car behind him.

"He took a motor large and new," misquoted the Chief of Clonmally, aloud, "fit for the deed he had to do . . ." and gauging his maximum safe speed to within seconds, he flung the Mercedes broadside, and squealing like a stuck pig, clean off the high-road and down the Lingfield fork; the car turned completely round once, but stayed on its four wheels as if glued to the road; it straightened, began to broadside the other way round, was pulled out of that one, and, somehow, held on the narrower, hedged road.

Behind them the speeding saloon, absolutely incapable of making that fearful turn, but urged to do so by that blind instinct of pure emulation on the part of its driver which has cost many a racing man his life, was sliding across the thick unmown grass into the middle of the meadow, and performing this evolution whilst lying on one side, aflame. It made a horrid din, altogether apart from the several detonations of its exploding tyres and the high-pitched screech of the police-car, braking for half a mile along the main road beyond it. And at this awe-inspiring moment, while still travelling at over fifty miles an hour, Conway saw ahead of him a string of horses, probably from the training stables at Lingfield, coming up at a gentle walk: there was really only one thing to do. He did it; he took to the grass himself, heard a front tyre blow, and ploughed to an ungainly halt.

The police-car was up with him within a few minutes. Strong hands were laid upon Arnold, who was dragged unresisting towards an indomitable, staggering figure with a face of ghastly pallor viciously marked with thin, running streams of blood. It was Arnold's assailant of the early morning. Behind him lurched a ragged henchman. Policemen could be seen trying to lug by their heels two other inanimate men from the burning wreck of the blue saloon; Arnold noted as detached and strangely insignificant details the queerly lolling head of one of these, and the bizarre effect of the other's horribly smoking hair. . . .

"Can you let me have motor-transport, Sergeant?" hoarsely demanded the bloodstained man. Arnold gazed with fascination and a continuing inexplicable lassitude at the cold ferocity of his pale eyes; it seemed to him in a distant sort of way a queer thing that the sergeant of County Constabulary did not notice it, too, and recoil from the handing over of even the basest of criminals into the charge of so obviously degenerate and malevolent a

keeper; then it occurred to him to wonder, dully, if in very truth these men *were* the London Flying Squad—whether in fact someone *had* preferred that startling charge of embezzlement against him; a misunderstanding, of course, a mistake, but a genuine mistake; or *was* it a mistake? *Had* he embezzled? His experience proving too much for him, Nature used her strong power of intervention. Arnold fell limp in the sergeant's rough grasp; he had fainted clean away.

"Here's a go," placidly observed that official, letting him slide down upon the soft bosom of the grass. "Hadn't you better take our mobile car?" he said to the bloodstained man. "I see there's another of ours, over there, just come up. I can get back on that. Is there any hurry? What's the exact charge?"

He fumbled at his breast pocket, suddenly bethinking him of the necessity of having all this down in black-and-white.

"Got your warrant there?" he asked, moistening a pencil under his full and gingery moustache that rose and gently fell to his placid breathing.

"Dammit, Sergeant," the other said, preserving the amenities of police co-operation by means of a strained laugh. "I've just had a pretty nasty shaking. Two of my chaps are dead, back there. Time and to spare for taking things down in your notebook. I want that fellow safely put away, and then I want a bed in hospital. Let me take him now. The mobile car will do fine."

He got his way. Arnold was loaded like a sack of oats into the rear seat of a black-and-green open tourer with its black hood drawn tightly down, and within ten minutes it had purred from the scene, taking the Lingfield road, and leaving to their own devices a horde of official and unofficial persons dealing with a wrecked car, two dead bodies considerably burned but with their clothing whole upon them, and a magnificent, shining automobile with a burst front tyre (which rapidly spreading rumours among the crowd identified with Herren Himmler and Hitler—two personages certainly often seen on the cinema screen riding in similar cars of that august make, and reported now, on the evidence of a villager with a cleft palate, to have been dropped, complete with the car, by strong parachutes from an aeroplane of gigantic size and unusual colour).

"Where's that Sir Brian Conway?" agitatedly asked the sergeant, seeing the trim figure of his inspector striding over the sward towards him, and realizing the enormity of sheer mass

attaching to the notes, about all this business, which, somehow, he just hadn't managed to set down in his notebook. Notebook? It would fill two notebooks, from start to finish.

"You may well ask," unkindly remarked his constable colleague. "See what's in the pockets of them corpses!"

He held out two black-jacks and a pair of brass knuckle-dusters.

"Might be of use to the Flyin' Squad," said the sergeant, without conviction. The constable mutely held up a packet of assorted identity cards and police passes, fanning them out as if demonstrating the beauties of a powerful bridge-hand. The sergeant gulped. The constable held up, as his last, most shattering exhibit, two razor-blades neatly fixed into strips of sticking-plaster ready to be slipped over the finger-ends of persons addicted to the use of such implements.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" bleated the unhappy sergeant, "wherever is that Sir Brian Conway?"

None answered him, least of all the Chief of Clonmally himself, who rode, chatting happily, by the side of an Army truck-driver from the famous State of Iowa, no respecter of persons, and no lover of the police; him Sir Brian had privately conferred with, seeing him halted by the roadside watching the scene enacted for him, like a pageant, on the smiling greensward.

"Sure, I'll follow 'em," he had said. "I'm kinduv Irish, myself."

He spoke with perfectly fascinating slowness, as if each word were being carefully considered during the actual process of utterance. He sat now leaning over his wheel, drawling out his quiet comments as the heavy truck lumbered along shady lanes behind the police-car, right off its route but ("What—the—hell!") getting to London somehow, gradually, just the same.

"I never saw," he said, "two guys that looked deader than those fellers. Well, they looked dead, all right, to me."

He jammed his foot on the brake.

"Where in Hell they goin', now?" he demanded. The black-and-green car ahead of them had turned off the made road along a gravelly track twisting sharply through a young fir plantation.

"They've got to bump him off, you see," explained Conway, "and also, they've got to make it an accident. That's what they couldn't do, till now. Now, they're probably taking him to some spot where they can do the job efficiently without interference."

"T'ck, t'ck," the man from Iowa clucked disapprovingly. "Say, you look as if you might pack a punch somewheres about you. We're two against two, assuming that thin, dark feller's in no fit state to take his own part, huh? I wonder if I still keep my punch? Yeah" (he made this word last a full second-and-a-half). "I wonder. An' here we are!"

Two surprised faces were turned on them as the tall truck stopped, in a grassy clearing next to a board shed, its front bumpers almost touching the police-car. The next moment, the man with the bloodstained face was seen to be pulling out from under the corner of his jacket a big, blue revolver. It spun from his hand as Conway's pistol, fired as he drew it, barked once. The next instant the man from Iowa, first stopping in his stride with an ample gesture of one arm to settle his slanting cap over one ear, swung in a raking punch with the other hand, shuffled his feet exactly as if he were wiping them very quickly on the turf, still wet with morning dews, and hit the pallid face in front of him a truly fearful blow which made an audible crushing noise on impact; the man with the bloodstained face jerked up into the air, quite rigid, and fell his full length to the ground without putting out a hand to save himself; he lay there inert. Looking at him briefly as he went after the other man, Conway was convinced that his jaw was fractured.

"Yeah," said the man from Iowa, scratching the underneath of his fleshy jowls, "I think I keep my punch."

The man facing Conway had already slipped over his fingers the glinting, cruel razor-blades, and he waited, slightly crouched, keeping perfectly still. Conway caught the evil gleam just in time to save the veins of his wrist. He dropped to the ground, well back on his propped arms, and delivered a tremendous kick, with a stout, hob-nailed brogue shoe, upon the man's kneecap, bringing him down to the grass at once, uttering a howl of agony; he received then the full lashing stroke of Conway's left leg, weighted with the steel-shod brogue, right under his lifted chin, and rolled slowly over upon his back with languid, unflexed movements of his arms like one irresistibly overcome by a profound impulse to deep sleep—as, indeed, was his precise case.

"Nice work," remarked the truck-driver. "But why ever didn't you use your hands? Oh," he added, bending over that supine form, "I see! Gee! *Very* nice work!"

He fondled his jowl again.

"Can I leave everything to you now?" he asked. "I'm in the

United States Army. Thanks for the party. It was swell. Hope we meet again some time."

He held out a red paw covered in sandy down, gripped Conway's outstretched hand briefly, and returned to his truck, settling his cap carefully. He backed and turned it, waved a farewell, and rocked away between the ranked firs, standing in green-gold beauty where the strengthening sun struck slantwise through their upper branches, and mysteriously dark below.

Over the tonneau of the police-car, below the black hood, Arnold's white face looked, astonished, out upon the morning.

"W-what goes on?" he enquired thickly.

"Mayhem," answered Conway, stooping to peer closely at the chief assassin, "goes on, apace. This one is quite dead, I'm afraid. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*—also, they that live by the black-jack, etc. He must have had a serious injury in the car crash. Couldn't have been Iowa's blow. Let's have a look at t'other. Umm. I fear he's gone, too. Just look at that! When he lifted his chin to yelp in agony my kick on the jaw broke his bally neck . . . not a mark on him except the bruise. T'ck, t'ck, as my pal from Des Moines would remark (and what a pal, if I may say so—what a man and a brother!) Come on, cock," said the baronet to Arnold, his soliloquies over, "there's nothing we can do for these gentlemen. Let us take the road."

They placed the two bodies, previously so invested with malignant ill-will and now so coldly indifferent to all mundane things, side by side in the small shed—it appeared to be used as a place of safe keeping for bundles of salvage—covering them decently in sacking, and stepped out again into the glad day.

"I'm hungry," said Conway. "About this time I am wont to take a small smackerel of something. It must be nearly noon . . . it *can't* be," he interrupted himself, staring at the shadows on the grass. He lifted his left wrist. "Merciful heavens, it's practically dawn," he exclaimed. "It's a quarter to eight, to put it with precision. The day is young. We have our lives before us. Where can we eat, chum?"

"I—er—I wonder, would you care to come along to my place," said Arnold, climbing into the seat next to Conway, already at the wheel of the police-car. "We should be nice and quiet. There's plenty of eggs, and——"

"Eggs!" cried his companion. "I haven't had an egg for three months, and that was a bad one. I suppose you grow 'em, being you live in the country. Eggs! Lead me to them."

As they bowled along slowly by devious side-roads, aiming to strike into Arnold's lane at the upper or less public end—both of them had unaccountably become seized with a conspiratorial longing for privacy and secret communion—Conway thought aloud upon problems cognate to their joint circumstances.

"There's no use blinking the fact," he murmured, spinning gently the wheel between his broad hands, "that we have left a trail of spoliation and death, trespass and confiscation, all the way from Heavenridge Town station to the outskirts of lovely Lingfield; we have crossed, briefly but not unnoticed and not without honour, three counties, breaking the law in each; it hasn't taken us very long, but credit for that goes rather to the speeding-up of everything in modern life—it's just a sign of the times. My pal from Iowa said to me just before he left me something to the effect that he had spent three months in battle-scarred south England under the entirely mistaken impression that this was a sleepy sort of country that badly needed waking up; he said it was now his conviction that high old times occurred around these parts, of the same highly concentrated and unpredictable nature as the changes in our weather. I shall have to telephone to the Yard, and speak, if possible, to the Chief Constable of your part of the country, or the Lord-lieutenant, or somebody. Perhaps the Rodent Deinfestation Officer is the man I mean. There is only one reasonable explanation of all that has happened."

"Whatever's that?" asked Arnold, startled. It did not seem to him that any entirely reasonable explanation could exist.

"Murder," said the eminent King's Counsel, whose high legal reputation had been made in the field of criminal law, and enhanced by so many brilliant defence-briefs on the capital charge. "Something will come of this. I hope it mayn't be human gore."

"Gore," squeaked Arnold. "But who? When? Was this what brought you to Heavenridge, Sir Brian?"

The baronet drove on, gently and without speech, a mile or more.

"No," he said, then. "I came down to ride high horses at Tom Clarke's place. Best man for horses in south England. A holiday I was after. But somehow and somewhere, back of all these exciting events, there's a Body. Those toughs were under orders to eliminate you. They could have had no personal animus. They didn't *know* you, personally. But they knew who employed you . . . has it occurred to you that in the course of narrating all that happened to you yesterday and today, the word 'murder'

cropped up more than once, and even the word 'poison' was mentioned, also? While as for dear old James de Forrest Fosdyke, of Fosdyke Dyke, Heavenridge, in the County of Kent, well, arson, rape and robbery were referred to, as well as murder."

"But, good lord," expostulated Arnold, "this was only village gossip—pub small-talk."

The car rose over a low-parapeted humpback bridge of red brick, below which gleaming and perfectly straight ran a railway-line.

"That's the spot where I disappeared," said Arnold, pointing to two low, black-mouthed arches close to the track on the far side. "Those are the openings leading down to the main line . . ."

"Yes," said Conway. "That wasn't just gossip, eh? That happened. Attempted murder for no apparent motive! It bears thinking about, laddie. Murder is committed for gain or revenge—or to cover up another crime—such as embezzlement, or murder. You see?"

"Yes," said Arnold meekly. "I see. . . ."

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The Heavenridge police inspector, sitting later by the window of Arnold's white-painted front sitting-room, did *not* see; plainly he was flummoxed by this poignant narrative poured into his red ears out of which grew certain hairs of uncertain colour; he made as an accompaniment to his processes of ratiocination a slight clicking noise with his false teeth.

Conway sat before his dish of eggs in the room that had the museum tidiness of a bachelor *ménage* and was filled with sunshine glancing brightly off the primrose china, gleaming on the spotless paint, laughing among flowers in vases and passing with a benedictory and mellow glow over the gold titling of long rows of red, brown, green, blue and worn calf bindings on the long rows of books filling two walls to the height of the table-top.

"And should you imagine, sir," asked the inspector with deference, "that, supposing this—er—theory of yours about murder or such-like having been done, proves to be erroneous, then all these goings-on of yours are legal, as you might put it?"

"Oh, rather," said the barrister negligently, and to Arnold's profound secret relief. "You can't pin anything on me, officer. After all, as far as the road smash is concerned, the chap in the lead can't be in the wrong. They didn't *have* to follow me round

that corner, and although I can be charged with dangerous driving, the danger was to people in front of me. The other deaths were in self-defence, first of all, and in perfectly justifiable prevention of murder, secondly."

"That's presumption, Sir Brian."

"Of course. Are you giving me lessons in law, Inspector? There is such a thing as legal presumption, you know. Anyway, the short answer to all this is: *come off it!* You won't get anywhere. I'm giving you a private tip, and my tips have a way of coming to pass. The Sussex and Surrey police can sort out the difficulties they've got themselves into by accepting the *bona-fides* of a racecourse gang who'd obviously pinched a police-car, with papers and all the rest of it. You don't want to get Kent involved in that mess. I think I've made out a case for police investigation of these extraordinary attacks on Mr. Winterset. What do you think?"

"Well," said the inspector, clicking furiously, "if you put it like that, I've got to take notice of it, I suppose . . ."

"I do put it like that," said Conway, pleasantly.

" . . . but I don't see what we can do about it, sir. On your own admission the accused persons are all—er—deceased."

"Yes," said Conway, patiently, "but what we'd like to know is, who put 'em up to it? They didn't even know Mr. Winterset."

"There again, we've only got Mr. Winterset's word——" began the inspector, when Conway rose from the table. His Irish patience, nebulous in quality and uncertain in quantity, had gone from him.

"All right, all right," he said. "Unhook. Leave it to me. As long as you've got my statement, no doubt the Chief Constable can tidy up the loose ends of the other business. I'm morally certain that there is some grave crime at the bottom of all this——but as crime-prevention's no part of your duties, we must wait——"

The telephone, resting on the top of the book-shelves near his left elbow, shrilled imperatively. He picked it up; his eyes in the distilled sunlight reflected off the bright surfaces of the room looked almost turquoise as he listened.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, he's here. One moment."

He handed the telephone to Inspector Goodman, who rose, crossed the room, and took it from him.

"Goodman," he said. "Oh, yes, sir. Yes, sir, I understand Sir

Brian has spoken . . .” There was a long pause, during which Inspector Goodman listened with a profound attentiveness to the burring resonances, audible to Conway and Arnold, but indistinguishable, of a voice communicating to him news which made his brown eyes open wider and wider; Conway’s lips, as he looked across the breakfast table to Arnold, formed noiselessly the words “Chief Constable”.

“I’ll go at once, sir,” said Goodman. “Sir Brian? Yes, sir. And Mr. Winterset, sir?” His voice was very disapproving. “Very good, sir. Is Dr. Heavibody at the house now? Right—I’ll attend to that. Thank you, sir. Good-bye.”

He put down the telephone receiver on its rest with a delicate, slow, thoughtful movement, his eyes on the plain brown pile carpet at his feet. When he looked up, there was a new expression in them. Inspector Goodman on the job, as Arnold and Conway were to learn, was a decidedly different officer. He had, temperamentally, little tolerance for the insubstantial aspects of his work, for suspicions, attitudes of mind, and subjective phenomena of all kinds. What he liked was facts. He was to get, in the common phrase, a bellyful of them, shortly.

“Old Mr. Ranaldshaw,” he said, “was found dead in bed, half an hour ago, by his housekeeper. Dr. Heavibody thinks he’s been poisoned. And it looks very much as if he’s been poisoned by his nephew, Mr. Cumber. The Chief Constable wants me to go over there at once, taking you two gentlemen with me.”

He looked out of the window across Arnold’s bright strip of flower-bordered lawn, to where beyond the front gate there gleamed the bonnet of a police-car, rightfully the property of the Sussex County Constabulary.

“I think we’ll borrow that car, to save time,” he murmured. “One of our chaps can drive it back when he brings one to the house for me.”

“Allow me to drive you, Inspector,” said Conway, gathering up his pipes and tobacco pouch.

Arnold, bathed and shaved, resplendent in a white collar-attached shirt and a new suit of silver-grey flannel, followed them down the garden path, climbed into the back seat of the car, and pondered, as they sped down the lane shaded all on one side with burdened elm trees, the personality of John Cumber, old Ranaldshaw’s nervously fluent, efficient, slim nephew—a partner in his business, likely heir of the old boy. Just as they turned, slowly, into the main road about three hundred yards downhill from the

Duck, he spoke aloud the conclusions of his heart and mind applied to the possibility that young Mr. John had poisoned his uncle.

"He wouldn't do it," he said.

Conway caught the words.

"Why not?" he demanded.

"Poison," said Arnold, firmly. "Not poison. Not Mr. John."

"I think you're wrong," said Inspector Goodman, staring ahead through the windscreen as they raced up the hill and levelled out opposite the Duck (into the welcoming interior of which villagers by ones and twos would soon be wending for their Sunday midday beer), "the evidence seems clear enough. The old man left a note."

Nothing more was said until they had passed the ivy-covered gateway leading along a gravelled drive to the house and stables at Gallop Mile, and had proceeded as far as a tall hedge of thick yew hiding from the eyes of the passing vulgar a monstrous, ugly yellow stucco mansion, Gables—it had no gables, not one—the residence and country retreat of Charles Shadforth Winter Ranaldshaw, commission agent, deceased; he had lived in it alone, except for a deaf housekeeper and a gardener-cum-chauffeur-cum handyman.

The car purred to a front porch upraised on thick plaster pillars and containing a flight of steps leading to an open front door. In the doorway her hands folded decorously before her and resting on a dress of brown silk, was Mrs. Potter. She unfolded her hands as the car stopped and made a tentative motion of one of them towards her right ear, ready to listen. . . .

"Good morning!" she shrilled at them; her heavy, prim face was set into lines of invincible stupidity which not even the death of her employer under presumably tragic circumstances could much enliven with the gleams of intelligence, interest, or even compassion. "Doctor is upstairs, waiting for you. Will you go up, please?"

"Good morning," they chorused back at her with raised voices. They went past her into a dark, square, bare hall and waited while she shut the door noiselessly. She picked up the skirts of her trailing, rustling, voluminous brown silk, and preceded them up a broad flight of stairs which led down into the middle of the hall from a landing parallel with the far wall and opposite the front door, then ascended again from this landing, to right and left, curvingly, to bring them out upon a broad passage

lighted by three large windows facing the drive and the yew-screened main road; beyond lay the meadows of Gallop Mile climbing a low slope of land to the south which hid Tom Clarke's house and outbuildings, except for the golden gleam from a weathercock rising above a small clock-tower on his stables.

Mrs. Potter turned the handle of a door on the right of the passage and the three men entered the room of death. Sitting perfectly motionless in an armchair, his head thrown back on its faded tapestry, his brick-red face—crowned with a crop of short, very thick, very white hair—tilted to the light filtering through drawn blinds, his eyes closed, and his large white hands folded upon a big, black-waistcoated belly propped up on his thighs covered in trousers of a pepper-and-salt pattern, was a huge man. . . .

Conway gazed at him with satisfaction. Such men, he said to himself, are the product of certain good eras in human affairs, when a moderate material prosperity, devotion to a worthy job of work, and a pronounced individuality of temperament, are allowed full scope for the architecture of Character: he blazed with a sudden wrath against the assassin who should have brought such a one to an untimely end—and by the creeping, loathly method of poison. This reverie was interrupted by the opening of the giant's eyelids, fringed with white lashes, to discover a pair of fiercely peering, bitter, blue, bloodshot, and wholly alive eyes.

"Huh," said the man in the chair, moving nothing but his eyes. "You Conway? Chief Constable spoke of you. And this is your young pal, eh? I'm Tom Heavibody. Charlie Ranaldshaw has a stomachful of arsenic."

Conway turned, following the glance of the blue eyes towards a great four-poster bed. An old man lay, queerly shrunken, under the covers, his head turned sideways on the pillow, his features contorted . . . there was in the room a perceptible odour of garlic. Inspector Goodman was bending over the mortal envelope of that old man who had built up since the almost legendary days of King Edward the Seventh one of the largest bookmaking connections in the country.

Dr. Heavibody grunted, and rose to his full height of six feet and five inches, grasping a thick stick (with which once, visiting a cottage patient immured behind tiny windows that had never been opened, he had by violent thrusting motions punched holes

in all the small, square panes to let in fresh air, disregarding the outcries of the patient's aged mother).

"Well," he growled, "come on, copper. What d'ye want to know? When he died, when he took the poison, eh? No use asking me. Some time after ten o'clock last night, almost for certain, he was poisoned. Must have been dead within an hour after taking it—big dose. I saw him at half past nine this morning. Been dead not less than six hours, not more than eleven hours. Tell you more when I've done the analysis."

"The autopsy, Doctor. I see," said Goodman, with cautious respect bred of an experience, going back for years, of the doctor's blistering tongue.

"I said analysis," grunted the doctor. "Dammit, can't you *smell* the stuff? There's almost enough unvolatilized arsenic on the eiderdown and the carpet to tell us what we want to know. Must have vomited three separate times within an hour. Emptied himself."

"Yes, Doctor. I see," said Goodman.

"Huh," said Dr. Heavibody. Then he flicked his angry little eyes across to Conway's face.

"How could a man be induced to take that much arsenic without being revolted, without suspecting it, Doctor?" asked Conway. "It would be almost too nauseating to drink, wouldn't it? Even Fowler's——"

"There you go," the old fellow roared, cutting him short. "You heard what I said to the damn' copper, didn't you? I haven't made my analysis. How do I know what form he took the poison in? I don't know if it's Fowler's solution, do I? Or rats'-bane, or weed-killer, or blasted sheep-dip, or realgar from a tannery or a fireworks factory? Do I?"

"I don't think it's Fowler's solution," said Conway calmly. "*I* think it's nearly neat, white arsenic."

"Oh, you do, do you?" sneered the doctor. "Why?"

"The concentration," answered Conway, and looked away from the bed and straight at the doctor.

"Gertcha!" exclaimed Dr. Heavibody with a bass snort of disgust. "Modern detective, I see. Ever read Sherlock Holmes, huh? Give you points and a beatin', boy." He suddenly rolled back his firm, full lips and disclosed a row of enormous yellow teeth in a friendly grin. "'The bane of our profession, my dear Watson, is the forming of premature theories upon insufficient data.' Not but what it's a pretty good guess. A guess, mark

you—but a tolerably good 'un. I fully expect it to be confirmed. And that permits us to speculate upon possible ways of administerin' a thunderin' great dose of the stuff without the victim yellin' blue murder. It'd have to be—*either* made up into tablets, swallowed with water, like aspirin, *or* heavily disguised under some other, probably nauseatin', flavour, of which the victim could be persuaded for his own good, so to speak, to quaff a wallopin' draught."

Dumb, stricken with a palsy of certainty and horror, Arnold pointed with outstretched finger to the bedside table.

"Aspirin," said the doctor. "Perfectly good brand, 5-grain tablets, slightly adulterated with arrowroot. He wasn't my patient. What'd he take 'em for?"

"Rheumatism," croaked Arnold. "I've seen him take seven at one go."

"Pain-killer, eh? Have to have that analysed, Inspector."

"Yes, Doctor," said Goodman meekly.

Dr. Heavibody continued to stand very still, grasping his stick, regarding the inspector with a sardonic and baleful eye.

"Well, go on," he barked. "Get started. Let's see some of this fancy modern technique—dusting for prints an' all that. What do you do now?"

"All in good time," placidly replied the inspector. "You've no doubt heard all about the note which deceased left. Where is it, Doctor?"

"Everything in this room is exactly where it was when I came in—and untouched. I didn't even touch the body. No need, with all my experience. I gotta nose, young feller-me-lad. Fresh air, see? Mrs. Potter, the elderly female" (she was at least twenty years the doctor's junior) "who admitted you to this chamber, found that note and read it out over the telephone to the Chief Constable, when he rang her up after getting the news from your police-station. It's over there, look."

He waved his stick. Goodman walked over to the mantelpiece and took down with tender care a stiff sheet of blue paper propped against a vase of *cloisonné* ware. He moved with it towards the yellow glare filtering into the room with a lurid and pallid light from the hot day beyond the drawn linen window-blinds. After reading it he handed it to Conway, who held it so that Arnold could read it, standing beside him. The writing was done with a fine nib, in sloping, angular, and somewhat wayward

characters, and towards the end it became very irregular in spacing and size.

"I—I—think that's the old man's writing," said Arnold, at once.

"You do, eh?" exclaimed the inspector. "Would you swear to it, now, Mr. Winterset?"

"I believe I would," said Arnold, studying it again. "Of course, it's a bit scrawled, in parts."

"Of course," said the doctor. "If that was written by the dead man it was written in hellish agony interrupted by attacks of vomiting of a violence almost sufficient to deprive him of his senses, temporarily."

"Just so," said Goodman.

I believe [ran the note] I have been poisoned I don't think those were aspirins I took John was in the room He wouldn't help me He must have changed the bottle Nobody answers the bell John Cumber has done this to me my nephew he took the securitie out of safe cash too saw him or else that mixture Fosdyke bridge tonight but John Cumber saw me ill vom vomit agony

Then came, in great, thin straggling capital letters, P T O. Conway turned the stiff sheet. The writing began again, very firm, angular and clear, and only at the end and in the signature did it betray the mis-shapen and sprawling characteristics that were so noticeable on the obverse side. *I Charles Shadforth Winter Ranaldshaw of Gables Heavenridge in the County of Kent do hereby revoke all testamentary dispositions of my property whatever and whensoever made and believing myself about to die alone do hereby make my last will and testament I give will and bequeath all my property interests possessions and everything of which I am at my death possessed absolutely and with out conditions of any kind to*

The writing straggled and failed. The trail of the pen held in a slackened grip wandered erratically over the paper, seemed to recover itself, and wrote out, shakily but legibly, the characters:

Chas. Ranaldshaw

"I suppose that isn't legal?" asked Goodman, without turning away his gaze from a dark-green safe standing in the corner of the room farthest from the fireplace and opposite to the bed.

"I hardly think it will suffice to disinherit," began Conway, then stopped to ponder. "That branch of our quaint judicature," he continued, "which concerns itself with matters of Admiralty, Probate and Divorce attaches great importance to any man's words uttered when he believes himself about to die. There are no witnesses, but then this document affirms that the old man was about to *die alone*."

"It would have to be read in conjunction with the words on the other side, I suppose," said the inspector, still staring at the safe. "You know, Sir Brian, this, here, looks to me the kind of receptacle likely to have contained securities and cash. He could easily see anybody who might get to work on it, for purposes of abstracting same, from his position in the bed. I wonder if it's open *now*?"

Conway walked up to the safe, stooped, tried the handle after wrapping his hand in a silk handkerchief (in deference to the police theory, pathetically maintained in spite of experience, that murderers *will* leave their finger-prints adhering to all smooth surfaces), and shook his head. Then he knelt on the carpet amid the flowers depicted in its lush pile, and turned the knob with minute motions, bending his ear to listen—back, and forth, he turned it, listening the while to the music of the clicking tumblers—then sat back on his heels and swung open the safe door. Dr. Heavibody chuckled, Goodman frowned, and Arnold gaped. The safe was entirely empty.

Conway rose, and began to wander round the room, prying and peering, whistling soundlessly under his breath. When his circuit brought him close to Dr. Heavibody he heard a grunting murmur in his ear.

"I see you've noticed it, too," said the doctor. "It's extremely odd, eh? Yet isn't it difficult to believe that a murderer could make a mistake as elementary as that? Is it reasonable?"

"It does happen, you'll agree," murmured Conway. "It does happen. But it's a *remarkably* elementary mistake. I can't see it anywhere, can you?"

"It's not in sight," affirmed the doctor. "I've scanned every inch of the room. And it couldn't in the nature of things have been locked away. I'd say he was *in extremis* when he finished that will with his signature."

Conway stood beside the huge doctor and slowly examined the room. It contained the bed, with its blankets, sheets and eiderdown; a bedside table carrying a water-carafe, a glass, a

bottle of aspirins, a cup and saucer with what looked like milk adhering to it, a small stationery rack with sheets of blue paper and matching envelopes, a pad of blotting-paper, a silver revolving pencil, a fountain-pen with its cap screwed over the non-business end to reveal a broad, ink-corroded gold nib—and a book; the carpet on the floor, two ornaments and a marble clock on the mantel, a large double wardrobe, the safe in the corner, a towel-rack beside a fitted wash-basin with soap, glass, nail-brush and sponge, and two chairs, completed the furnishings and contents of the room. Conway opened the wardrobe. On a broad shelf were the clothes the old man had obviously taken off on retiring. A dressing-gown hung inside the door.

"Funny there's no dressing-table," said Conway, opening the second flap of the wardrobe doors. It revealed a complete man's dressing-table, including a hidden electric light which illuminated him as he faced his clear unshadowed reflection in a fitted mirror.

"Electric bell was cut downstairs," said Goodman, "if it was cut at all. It doesn't seem to ring, but nothing's been tampered with up here."

"Shout for that Mrs. Potter," said Conway. "I want to ask her a question."

"I want to ask her several," said Goodman. "I'll see if I can get her up here."

He left the room. Conway looked at Arnold.

"You've seen the old chap write, often enough, I suppose?" he asked. Arnold nodded. "Well," Conway continued, "what kind of pen did he use?"

"At the office, an ordinary pen in a holder, and ink," said Arnold. "He had a fountain-pen, though. And that's it, on the little table. Why?"

"Only that I'm morally certain the note and the will weren't written with that broad nib. That's a Parker pen, built to last for ever. But nobody could write that fine, angular, Victorian writing with it. Have a look at that signature again. D'you still think it's genuine?"

Arnold studied the blue paper.

"It's his office signature all right," he said. "It's the signature which appears on cheques and letters . . . but it certainly isn't the writing he did with that fountain-pen. That was always thicker and heavier—not much like his writing, in fact. He seldom used it at the office."

"How do you know what his writing looked like, when he used the fountain-pen?"

"Oh, once or twice, when he's not been coming to town, he's sent me a brief note about something or other, from home—and it's always been written with this thick nib."

"Anybody else ever get notes from home sent to them?"

"No. Now you come to mention it, nobody else *ever* did. I remember now what he used that fountain-pen for. Figures. He'd pull it out of his waistcoat pocket, even when he had a pen in his hand, sitting at his desk, to do figures on a slip of paper. And of course it was always figures he used to write me about."

Goodman came back to the room with Mrs. Potter. "Bell-wire's cut in the kitchen," he said.

Dr. Heavibody was the man for the task of eliciting intelligible replies to the inspector's questions, booming at Mrs. Potter in thunderous and terrifying tones to which she answered in the quavering, flat notes of the deaf. It appeared that nothing had been taken from the room, nothing had been touched, by her or anybody else, prior to the arrival of Conway and Goodman. . . .

"Looks as if that lets out young Mr. Cumber, then," said Conway, and Arnold nodded vigorously his dark head.

"Why so, sir?" demanded the inspector.

Conway told him, to the accompaniment of rumblings, chucklings and powerful proddings in the inspector's ribs from Dr. Heavibody.

"Good gracious," remarked Goodman. "Goodness gracious me. All this gets very sinister, I'm sure. This means, doesn't it—it *can* only mean—that someone deliberately tried to saddle Mr. Cumber with the crime?"

"Yep, cock," said Conway. "And I'll give you a tip, if you're not too proud to take it. Don't let on."

"Let on, sir?"

"Don't spill it, man," growled Dr. Heavibody. "Just keep it under your hat, see? Let whoever tried to swing it over on you think he—or she—has succeeded."

"Yes, Doctor," said Goodman, meekly. "Did you say 'she', sir?"

"I did so," said the doctor. "Woman's weapon, poison."

"Good lord, no, Doctor," said Conway, "not particularly. There's Palmer, and Armstrong, and Crippen, and——"

"Yes. Permit me to remind you that I said 'he—or she'.

Poison is a woman's weapon, son. Bashing, and throat-cutting, and carving-up with bread-knives, not so much so, see?"

"Yes, Doctor," said Conway, meekly. "I see. . . ."

"If we were to amble down the road," he said, a few minutes later, "at what might be termed a suitable pace, we should arrive at the Duck just about opening-time. I could telephone Gallop Mile from there, to save walking up the drive to the house. Could you take an ale, pal?"

"I certainly could," said Arnold, marching down the late Mr. Ranaldshaw's front steps. A nicely built, full-barrelled pony walked round the house from the side, his head held by Charlie Todd, who touched his cap to Arnold and Conway with the expressionlessness of the countryman to whom the social grading of others is as a closed book.

"Hello, Charlie," said Arnold at once. "Have you met Sir Brian Conway? Nice day."

"'Mornin', Arnold. G'd mornin', sir. Nice day, an' nice goin's-on, eh? Poor ol' guv'nor gone. 'Oo done it, sir, do they know?"

"Inspector Goodman has everything under control," said Conway.

"My trap ready?" boomed Dr. Heavibody's voice from the hall behind them; he appeared at the top of the steps and glared down upon Charlie Todd.

"I've warned you, Charlie Todd," he growled, "about that face of yours, haven't I?"

"Yes, Doctor," said Charlie, rubbing his brilliantly red cheek.

"Right. One of these days you'll be cursin' yourself for not doin' anything about it. Pony all right, do you think?"

"Middlin', Doctor. Whyn't you have that off foreleg seen to, afore it's too late? I've warned you now, ain't I? One o' these days——"

"All right, Charlie Todd, stow it. I'll drop in at Mr. Clarke's stables and ask Tom Bolton to have a look at it. Can I give you a lift down the road, gentlemen? I shan't be a minute in Gallop Mile. You won't be late for openin' time. Poison!" he added in a growl.

Four minutes later the pony stood and spurned with his round hooves the gravel before the door of Gallop Mile, open to

the warm noon. The doctor sat very upright, whip in hand, while Tom Bolton examined the questionable foreleg. Conway had slipped into the house to acquaint whomever he could find in there that he had in fact arrived in Heavenridge, though later than he had intended, and that his bags and, with luck, his car would be coming over from Lingfield during that afternoon. Arnold sat quiet behind the doctor's vast bulk. And into the space of swept gravel, where the drive ended before the door, came a group of riders led by a horsewoman sitting upright like a Life Guard and a horsewoman sitting slouched like a cowboy; the former was dark, voluptuous, and slightly over thirty—the latter was red-headed, blue-eyed, slimly curved, and slightly over twenty; their eyes passed briefly over the stooped figure of Tom Bolton, the trap, the doctor, and Arnold, and came to rest jointly, and with an effect of focus only perceptible to someone who was watching as closely as Arnold was watching, and as the doctor was watching, upon the debonair, black-haired figure of Conway bouncing out of the shadowed interior of Gallop Mile (a man slightly over forty) and exclaiming, as he paused on the top of the steps:

"Sirens!"

"How very sweet of you," said Georgette Cumber, pushing back a long, curved mass of raven hair with the handle of her whip; then she, too, heard the faraway, rising-and-falling note of the distant air-raid siren sounding an alert; she pinkened very slightly. . . .

"Well, I'm dashed!" exclaimed James de Forrest Fosdyke, urging his immense and bony quadruped forward until he sat looking down on the baronet over and round his great jutting nose with the fantastic and famous pointed eyebrows pricking away from it to either side like Lucifer's; his mouth opened beneath the trim, grey-edged, dark moustache, and he laughed on a deep, baying note . . . a man slightly over fifty. "Conway! How are you? I thought you'd decided not to come, after all. Ladies—meet the gallant and learned Chief of Clonmally; Caulfield—Sir Brian Conway. Mrs. Cumber. Miss Cumber. Mr. Sam Smallfield. Sir Benet Caulfield. Mrs. Caulfield. Penelope and Douglas, my infants . . . well met, at lunch-time, or very nearly."

(These were the riders whom Arnold had watched the previous day through the open window of the Duck, plus, of course, his late employer's lifelong partner in business—presumably his own employer, now, and perhaps, therefore, in one sense, old

Ranaldshaw's heir . . . a square, red-faced, middle-aged and well-preserved Yorkshireman of brusque manner, who had been known as Solid Sam in his earlier years of turf accountancy under more direct and outdoor circumstances than those he encountered nowadays in his luxurious office in Berkeley Square with, as it were, nightingales laid on . . .)

Tom Clarke cantered up the drive, a rearguard to his guests, and waved his gloved hand to Conway.

"Hello, Doctor!" he called to the unmoving figure sitting upright in the wheeled vehicle before his front door, and received a nod in acknowledgement of the greeting. Tom Clarke proceeded to introduce to the assembly on horseback that patriarchal and monumental figure of a medical man who had practised his scientific trade since the years before they were, most of them, born. The doctor merely grunted.

"And this is Mr. Winterset," ended Tom Clarke, "a member of our local, or Gallop Mile, platoon of the Home Guard, a Londoner who prefers to live with us down here in the country." Everybody made appropriate murmurs . . . J.F.F., however, touched his horse's flank, turned, and moved towards the trap, looking down at Arnold.

"Pleased to know you, Mr. Winterset," he said. "I've heard a good deal about you, here and there, but since I've been back home I think it's the first time we've met. We were all thinking of taking a drink. Won't you join us?"

"Nay, nay," cried Conway, instantly. "Mr. Winterset and I are on our way to the Duck, and the good doctor has promised to convey us thither. I'll see you all later. Hullo! *Here* they come . . ."

It was the buzz-bombs, already heralded by those distant siren-notes, and coursing now Londonwards with their bubbling uproar; one passed, fantastically swift, over the roof of the stables—and ceased, cutting-out to sudden, terrifying dead silence. Persons there behaved according to their several natures. Some flattened their palms into the sockets of the eyes, fearful of splintered glass; some dismounted, and dived for the cover of the walls, or into the open doorway of the house; some remained where they were, too fatalistic or too petrified to move; it was not long—the bomb went off with a tremendous noise and a vibration of the earth; some broken glass, somewhere, tinkled musically; a thick, immense pall of very black smoke rose instantly to a great height over a wood edging all one side of the

paddock beyond the vegetable garden and ending at the corner of the stable; the smoke stopped; then, like a memorial to the wantonness and military idiocy of the assault, it was succeeded by drifting, white clouds of wood-smoke.

"The wood's on fire!" shouted J.F.F., and set off at a gallop over the cropped turf. Stablemen ran out, received brisk orders from Tom Clarke, and vanished. Everybody in or near the house assembled, chattering and eager. Reinforcements summoned by telephone from the Duck came up on bicycles, as did Charlie Todd from Gables.

"The wind," said Ted Caper's calm voice, "is dead be'ind 'er. She'll come fannin' up, right to the stables. 'Ave you got the 'osses out, Tom?" This to Tom Bolton, shirt-sleeved and in riding-breeches for his Sunday morning help with Tom Clarke's horses. Tom nodded. There was an ominous crackling note as the eager, hidden flame ate its was hungrily deep into the piled and tangled deadwood and leaves about the knees of the trees, whipped to white heat by the balmy breeze blowing from the east into the heart of the little wood. The pump was working, now, in the stable-yard, and a long line was formed to pass the filled buckets smoothly forward and take the empties swiftly back, all the way from the stables, along the edge of the wood to two separate points, where with skill and judgment incisions had been made across the line of advancing fire—one, a hundred yards upwind, from the stable-wall, the other, some twenty yards nearer. The purpose of these deep cuts into the thick of the brushwood was to make a channel across which it was hoped the flames would not leap—the second cut was in case they were not in time with the first in preventing the feeding, hastening flames from reaching the ancient fabric of the stables, engulfing them, taking the two haystacks in two quick bites, and going on to make their big meal off Gallop Mile itself. Those best able to wield axes, sling the loaded water-buckets into the reeking furnace, flail the ragged line of burning undergrowth with besoms and brooms, and drag out felled trunks, were all at work on the two incisions, and all the others patiently passed and repassed the buckets, standing in a single line down the far side of the paddock, with one branch swerving off into the first gap, and a second turning off, hidden by the blue-and-white bitter clouds of wood-smoke where the combat was fiercest, into the gap further from the house. All this had taken shape swiftly under the crisp orders of J.F.F., that big-nosed master of men, of women, of horses. . . .

He was at the heart and centre of the work, axe in hand; a little to his right (nearer the paddock), and a little behind him, Conway and Arnold fought the insidious foe with brooms, while Sam Smallfield lugged to the accompaniment of lurid oaths trunks and branches out of the path of the advancing fire as J.F.F. sliced them down. Working with their backs to this group, cutting down the brushwood and all but the stouter growths on the side of the alley farthest away from the flames, General Sir Benet Caulfield toiled in silence, aided by Ted Caper, Charlie Todd and Tom Bolton. This advanced force was supplied with water by Tom Clarke, Georgette Cumber and her sister-in-law, the red-haired Ann Cumber, acting as the advanced part of the straggling, energetic line of guests, domestics, locals and (soon) soldiers from a nearby Bofors-gun site, which stretched back to the pump in the yard. And, twenty yards nearer the stables, another group was making another channel, a safety-valve, towards which very gradually but unmistakably the furious fire, leaping wind-hounded upon them in the bright sunshine, was driving the advanced force.

The danger-point was signalled by a great shout from J.F.F.

"Back, back!" he cried, kicking the burning stuff from his path with his long riding-boots, emerging from the smoke among them like a portent. "Out! Back into the paddock! Begin again at the second gully! Out, everybody!"

And he trampled the grass, sweeping up with him in his progress Tom Clarke and the two women, and plunging into the second clearing, beginning at once a ferocious onslaught on the standing timber . . . the fire indeed had gained on them a sufficient advantage to justify the withdrawal; it crawled now, however, where once it had leapt at them; it had crossed the first ravine made in its path after a slight but valuable check, and as soon as J.F.F. perceived it had fastened its teeth into the opposite bank, he realized that his position was infiltrated, the enemy behind him. Now there was nothing much for the fire to feed on before it reached the second gully, and here the water supply, by its mere concentration to one point instead of two, was doubled, and his manpower, also, was doubled.

But was it doubled?

"Where the deuce is Conway?" suddenly demanded Tom Clarke; at almost the same moment Ted Caper called out "*Arnold*" in a powerful, carrying voice. There was no answer.

"Good God!" exclaimed Tom Clarke, and detached himself

from the bucket-chain, stumbling uncertainly into the thin, acrid smoke. Ted, and James Spink, were at his heels. They tried getting closer to the paddock fence, but a raging tornado of heat and smoke drove them back.

"This way, sir," cried Ted, veering out into the clearer air at a purposeful lope. "Let's get be'ind the cut that was made—the fire's probably finished there."

Soon he turned, with a countryman's unerring sense of direction, through the choking smoke, and brought them close to the wood again, behind the rampart of fire, to an expanse of charred stumps rising from contorted, black, thin shapes that had once been growing things. A wild yell came to them out of the smoke.

"This way," said Ted, and plunged with carefully judged leaps towards the furthest point made by the incision. After a dozen yards he stopped, and yelled again. A hoarser shout sounded on his left and a little behind him; bending to get his labouring nostrils closer to the ground and the life-giving oxygen, he stumbled over a prone man, covered in heaving cloth, who seemed to be lying across another man, while endeavouring to drag him, inch by painful inch, through the hot ash carpeting the woodland.

Crouching low, Ted Caper dragged a handkerchief from his pocket and fastened it, with untrembling fingers, tightly across his mouth and nose, keeping his eyes tight shut. Then he got down beside the heaving heap and lifted a corner of the singed cloth; it was a man's flannel jacket.

"Get under him, Arnold," he said. "We can rush it, from 'ere. The fresh air's only a few yards in front."

Arnold Winterset, keeping his head down, moved across Conway's senseless body in instinctive obedience to that quiet and confident voice. They rose to a bent position together, holding the barrister each by one arm and one leg. Then they ran, blunderingly but fairly straight. Almost immediately they met Tom Bolton, who placed himself behind them, taking both Conway's legs; their pace improved, and soon they were in a pearly fog. Other figures imposed themselves on this soft and billowing curtain of half-light, and then they were in the warm, scented, reviving fresh air and the bright sunlight, and, for the second time that day, Arnold fainted.

Ted Caper knelt over him, feeling with confident, expert touches the dark, tousled, ash-covered head; he came to his

own conclusions at once, and conveyed them to Tom Bolton while people gathered vociferously around them, still kneeling in the cool grass. The fire was out.

"Ol' Arnold's bin coshed," murmured Ted. Tom looked at him with round, steady, grey eyes.

"So's the barrynite," he said.

"Oh," said Ted, feeling for his little tin of tobacco and cigarette papers. "Barrynite, eh? 'Oo is he, then?"

"Some K.C. bloke. I 'eard ol' J.F.F. interdooce 'im to the people up at the 'ouse."

"Yes?" said Ted. "Well, we don't let either one of 'em out of our sight until they come round and ol' Dr. 'Eavibody lookin' on, to see fair play. Accordin' to what I've bin 'earin' that ol' Ranaldshaw's bin bumped orf. Arnold and 'is pal, 'ere, were up at Gables about it. It don't look so good, to me."

For no compulsion would Ted yield on the point. The first hard impact of J.F.F.'s dominating personality on the situation was greeted by Ted with a sharp command, to everybody, to stand back, keep away, and get the doctor.

This was such excellent good sense that nobody there cared to gainsay it, though J.F.F.'s eye boded ill for those two men seated in the middle of the paddock, calmly smoking. The doctor, it transpired, had not left Gallop Mile, and when in the fullness of time he came to stand over them, his feet planted widely apart and his head sunk on his breast, they knew by the glimmer of his fierce little blue eyes on them that he thought they had done well, and accepted his rasping abuse with the greatest good humour. There is a secretiveness in the Men of Kent which makes them natural conspirators. To this fact, in all probability, both Arnold and Conway owed their lives that morning.

"Bring 'em up to the house, shall we, Doctor?" asked Tom Clarke, very concerned, and was surprised when the aged giant slowly shook his head.

"Mr. Winterset's cottage would be the ideal place," he said. "I'll drive them in the trap. They must be kept absolutely quiet."

It was no use arguing. To Arnold's cottage they were conveyed, to be bathed and dressed; Ted and Tom followed the trap on their bicycles, and were startled to see Conway open a bright eye, winking at them, as the pony came to a standstill outside the front gate.

"Carry me in as if I was a goner," he murmured, and they did. "Now," he said as he peeled off his clothes to the music of running water, "you realize, Doctor, what this means, eh? One of that bunch up there is the guilty party! We shall have to hold a little investigation right away—one of 'em smacked me under the ear and must have pushed me quietly into the burning undergrowth. Same with Mr. Winterset, I suppose."

Arnold nodded.

"There you are! Means that someone, of the crowd who went to fight that fire, was the one who gave the instructions to those thugs to lay for him this morning. The question is, which one?"

"That's the question," rumbled the old doctor in a placid bass. "But it's not easy to answer it. Could have been any of 'em, son." He turned to look out of the front window. "Here's the copper. Late, as usual. Let him in, Ted Caper."

Goodman burst into the room, his brown eyes goggling.

"Thank Heaven!" he exclaimed. "They told me——"

"They told you, Heraclitus, they told you I was dead—they brought you bitter news to hear and bitter tears to shed, eh?" said Conway. "I know; but tell, Inspector, the secrets of your heart—do you *now* accept it that the murderous onslaught upon Mr. Winterset was a deliberate attempt to remove a valuable witness before his story could be connected with the murder of old Mr. Ranaldshaw? Are you a convert? By the same token, it was deemed advisable to have a go at eliminating both him and meself from the case, on the assumption, presumably, that, Mr. Winterset having given me the dope, the dangerous information about what he saw on the night of the murder, both of us were in a position to upset the murderer's scheme."

"But—but—what *did* Mr. Winterset see on the night of the murder?" asked Goodman.

"Your bath's ready, Sir Brian," carolled Arnold from upstairs.

Conway, naked, ash-smeared and tousled, picked up a big, rough bath towel, and made for the door.

"If I'm not much mistaken," he said, "he saw the dead body of the man upon whom the murderer had hoped to fix the blame!"

Goodman sat down, heavily, in an armchair, took out a large silk handkerchief, and began to perform mopping actions round his neck and face. Dr. Heavibody, sitting by the window in his habitual upright and unmoving posture, leered at him wickedly.

"Better give it up, copper," he advised.

Goodman looked at him.

"I have," he said, clicking his dentures like castanets. "I've told the Chief to get the Yard in on this job. Someone's on the way down now."

CHAPTER III

"The name of those fabulous monsters (pagan I regret to say) who used to sing in the water, has quite escaped me" . . . Mr. Chuzzlewit suggested 'swans' . . . "Not swans. Very like swans, too. Thank you . . . nor oysters. But by no means unlike oysters; a very excellent idea; thank you, my dear sir, very much. Wait. Sirens! Dear me! Sirens, of course!"

—MR. PECKSNIFF.

"THERE'S the grease-drip," said Detective-Inspector Thrust, bending from his hips and peering, over and round the pipe jutting from his pike-like jaws, at a thin, spreading pool of oil, iridescent in the hot sunlight pouring into the chalk-pit; unmistakably, a car had stood for some hours on this spot—to which Arnold had unhesitatingly led his companions after telling his story over, from the very beginning, to this powerfully built rugged-faced man of middle height—who looked so much a typical impatient policeman and was actually a man of profound sagacity, unrelenting pertinacity, humour, and open mind. Thrust was peculiarly devoted to Conway, not only because his inspectorship was in fact largely due to successful operations carried out in collaboration with the barrister, but because he regarded Conway's prowess in the well-loved sphere of direct action, and his marked abilities as an investigator, with something approaching worship.

Thrust straightened, and took from the pocket of his tweed jacket a folded, inch-to-the-mile Ordnance Survey map.

"Just where are we?" he asked.

Arnold, over his shoulder, traced on the map a rough triangle having as its longest and straightest side the road from Heavenridge Town station running steadily north, crossing the railway which was parallel with Arnold's lane, passing successively the Duck, the entrance to Gallop Mile, and to Gables, and going on towards the downs and London; the base of the triangle was the railway along which Arnold had plodded when endeavouring to escape his pursuers the previous day; the third side was formed by a narrow, wandering by-road, crossing the railway far to the east and eventually joining the London road a mile or more past Gables; the chalk-pit lay tucked under a fold of

rising land almost equidistant from the point at which Arnold's side-lane debouched into the main road (by the station), from the little, black rectangles representing the buildings at Gallop Mile, and from another arrangement of black shapes marked in antique characters Fosdyke Dyke. A broken line, crossing the open fields between the main road and the chalk-pit (and ending on the lane at the junction of which with the main road itself stood the Duck), indicated the cart-track along which slowly and bumpily they had reached the chalk-pit in Conway's car, recovered only that morning from the Sussex police with its injuries set right.

"So the car—Mrs. Cumber's car—could have been driven in to this spot only along the lane we have just traversed, and that's the only way back again?" said Thrust.

"Yes, and for what purpose?" said Conway.

Thrust took the pipe from his mouth, pursed his firm, full lips, and looked at Conway with a half-apologetic, half-embarrassed smile.

"You've never been a constable on a night-beat, Sir Brian," he remarked. "What *would* a young woman drive her car into a place like this for, late at night, do you suppose?"

He put back the pipe, screwing up his eyes against the white-hot light and contriving an embracing and somehow roguish glance all round the steep, white, carved, encircling walls. He raised languidly one hand, to pull down over his eyes the brim of his lightweight summer felt hat, and without raising the level, tenor intonation of his voice or changing the expression on his pugnacious face, he said:

"There's someone lying on the top of the cliff, there, watching us. Let's take no chances, now. You, Mr. Winterset, first—walk casually round and put the car between you and the side of the pit I'm facing. You might get into the car, as soon as we join you. I don't think anything will happen as long as I continue to look this way. Whoever it is won't show himself unless he can be sure of getting all of us. . . ."

Arnold, too, was facing the white cliff. Even as he began to move away (thinking to himself how much better off he was in the care of Thrust than in the care of Goodman, that unbeliever) he lifted his gaze for a moment to the summit. He saw an arm uplifted, stiffly, with an atrociously familiar gesture, coming up and over against the sky as a bowler's arm comes up and over against the white-painted sight-screens, menacing you at the

wicket. But the owner of that arm was lying down, on the short grass cloaking the white cliff-edge. It could only mean one thing to a man who has practised throwing grenades from the prone position. The next instant Arnold saw the dark, dropping, round shape leave the thrower's arm, and a dozen thoughts fled through his mind with an effect of startled acceleration; acting purely instinctively, he stepped forward, past Thrust.

He had the dead-safe hands of a good deep-fielder; he knew he was going to make the catch of his life, for his life; it was an easy catch if you eliminated from your consciousness the knowledge that what was falling into your cupped hands was not a cricket ball but a live grenade with a four-second fuse capable of blowing you and your companions into red-gashed pieces; all you had to do was to remember what the sergeant had so often told you—if you are quick enough, you can throw 'em back before they explode; that's the reason you should wait a couple of seconds, with the pin released in your fingers, before you lob the grenade, over-arm, into the advancing enemy . . . he lifted his arms and brought back his hands surely and neatly with the surprising weight of the missile perfectly taken, then swung violently his right hand back, and pitched the bomb to the foot of the chalk cliff, thirty yards away, as he dropped flat and laid his hatless head between his outstretched arms; he had just time to see that Conway and Thrust, those wideawake persons, were likewise lying down, one on each side of him.

The grenade went off, with a shattering bang multiplied by a score of echoes thrown back from the walls of chalk.

"I wish to say," said the Chief of Clonmally, "that for pure, cold, stark *guts*—to say nowt at all about skill, as such—that little effort of yours transcends pretty well everything I've hitherto——"

"He's gone!" shouted Thrust, scrambling to his feet. "He's run for it. Let's get after him—come on!"

They piled into the open touring car over the back hood snugly folded down, and Conway performed wonderful feats with starter-button, gears, clutch, throttle and supercharger; they rocketed forth upon the cart-track which had brought them from the high-road and took the low, grassy bank on the left in a sort of convulsive leap, skidding violently across meadow-grass, and roaring up the slope towards the top end of the chalk-pit until they were baulked by a hedge; they leapt leggily to earth, scrambled through hawthorn and detaining sweet-briar,

crossed another field diagonally, panting as the steepness of the rising ground checked their first rush of speed, and guided by Arnold, ploughed blasphemously their way through another and a tougher hedge, and emerged upon the fenced lip of the cliff. All this took eight or nine valuable, desperate minutes. . . .

A smiling panorama of green fields met them, an observant horse, woods, distant chimneys rising over green elms . . . nothing human was visible.

"What lies at the bottom of that slope?" asked Thrust, pointing.

"The continuation of the lane we turned out of, below," said Arnold. "The cart-track makes a very roundabout climb into the chalk-pit."

"So we ought to have gone back down the cart-track," said Conway, bitterly. "Whoever chucked that bomb must have had a car to be sure of a getaway. And now he's got away—along the lane, I suppose."

"He?" said Arnold.

"I think it was a man," said Thrust. "I'll swear it wore a jacket."

"Yes," said Arnold, "but it looked like a black jacket, to me. Seen against the light, anything looks black, I know, but I thought it was a black jacket of some smooth stuff."

"Like, it might be, the jacket that Mrs. Cumber wore, yesterday, out riding?" said Conway quickly.

"Yes, perhaps. Or, it could be, like the black jacket J.F.F. wore yesterday, out riding," answered Arnold.

All this time they were striding back to the deserted car, and finding the passage of the two high hedges not nearly so easy in cold blood and without the spur of the chase; it was a quarter of an hour later that they arrived at the Duck, and Thrust disappeared at once into the private part of that hostelry, having urgent telephonic communications to make. Arnold and the barrister sat in the deserted bar, beer before them, and conned times, places and persons. . . .

"Dearly," said Conway, "would I have liked to have given chase to that potent unfriend of ours, be he a man or be he a woman, but I must confess, it would have been a wild-goose chase; Thrust's methodical check-up will be better, and the better for being soon set going. Now, let's see what we've got. It's by no means little, after all . . . you see, death having overtaken the hired assassins, all four of 'em, during the hectic

proceedings yesterday, we are confronted now with the instigator of their misdeeds, in person. Two attempts have been made to eliminate us, and it behoves us to be highly apprehensive of a third."

"You think that business in the wood, after the fly-bomb fell, was part of the job, then?"

"I do, pal. If ever I had a case of *malice prepense* brought sharply to my personal attention, it was when one of those thugs landed me a smack under the ear with a bough of beechwood. It *was* one of them, up at the house, you know. One of them . . . you see what a long list it makes?"

Thrust came in, his hat pushed off his forehead. He eyed the beer on the scrubbed, white table-top, and turned at once back through the doorway to the bar. Returning, he sat down carefully, jerking as he did so his beautifully creased trouserings with quick deft motions of the finger and thumb.

"*How* long a list?" he demanded, coming up for air from the golden deeps of a pint tankard of bitter beer.

"J.F.F., Sam Smallfield, General Caulfield, Tom Clarke, Privates Caper, Todd and Bolton, Georgette Cumber, Ann Cumber. Woman's weapon, poison," said Conway. "The good Dr. Heavibody vouches for the fact."

"Ah," said Thrust. "Not Caper. Not Bolton. Not Tom Clarke. These were the very blokes, you see, who tumbled to the fact that you two were missing, and braved the flames and smoke to get you out."

"Thank you, sir," said Conway, and ran his pencil lightly through three of the names on his list.

"And poison," said Thrust, placidly, "may be a woman's weapon, but it would need a very powerfully constructed woman, and one with very unwomanly nerves, to deliver such a couple of wallops as the pair of you received, and to do same while groping about in a lot of nasty, choking smoke. I take it you think the idea was to leave you both there to asphyxiate or burn?"

"You take it remarkably correctly, for a policeman," growled Conway. "And in case you think it's so damn' funny, let me remark that, on a perfectly reasonable assumption that you yourself are by now in the joint confidence of Mr. Winterset and myself, the murderer's idea at ten minutes to eleven today, as ever was, would be to blow the three of us into smallish pieces, such as would not be likely to be admitted into Court to testify to what we all three know."

"Whatever that is," said Arnold gloomily.

"Yes, indeed. Dammit, what *do* we know?" agreed the baronet.

"All in good time, gentlemen, all in good time," said Thrust. "We'll be safe enough now, I think, *whatever* it is. The murderer will assume, from now on, that such knowledge is a part of the police case as a whole, so that, short of murdering the entire Force, there's nothing to be gained by further attacks on us. But it's undoubtedly a very unpleasant party we have to deal with. And when our case gets near to being complete enough for an arrest, my guess is that the said party will—er—have another go. That's my opinion. What are you gentlemen drinking? One bitter, one mild-and-bitter . . ."

He gathered the empty tankards and left them, walking with the assured calm of an official unafraid of facts and ever ready to face their unpleasant consequences.

Arnold mopped a streaming brow. Conway pored over the half-sheet of notepaper on which he had inscribed exciting-looking little symbols in the shape of little trees and larger, round, black dots. Thrust came back with the beer.

"At ten to eleven, you see, that bomb was chucked at us," he placidly remarked. "Unlucky for us. Ten minutes before opening-time at the Duck here. Twenty minutes later, he'd never have got down this lane unnoticed, what with people coming along on bicycles, and a row of faces looking out of this window to see him come by, from the chalk-pit. The regulars are just coming in now. As it is, the three constables I've spoken to have nothing to report that pins anybody down, and I don't hold any hopes that their enquiries will unearth anything."

"Didn't any of them see *any* cars?" asked Conway.

Thrust consulted his notebook, cleared his throat, and answered.

"One of 'em saw Charlie Todd in his late employer's Rolls-Royce, driving down into Heavenridge. That would be southward, along the main road, I take it. Another saw, and saluted, Mrs. Cumber's car, but owing to the sun being in his eyes, he can't say who was driving in it. And the third saw no one and nothing, but has discovered that Sir Benet Caulfield's car was out during the morning, and isn't back yet, and that Mr. Sam Smallfield was seen at the top of the Gallop Mile paddock, talking to Mr. Fosdyke. About five minutes past eleven, that was."

"You see?" exclaimed Conway, triumphantly. "All of 'em—

every darned one, except the red-headed gal. The slim one. John Cumber's sister. Every other one of 'em is down on *this* list"—he stabbed the paper before him with a delicate, dotting motion of his silver pencil—"and, with the aforesaid exception, every one of 'em is down on *that* list"—and he pointed the pencil towards the notebook lying open on Thrust's blue-serge-covered knee.

"Pretty," said Thrust, staring at Conway's paper and making champing motions of his pike-like under-jaw. "Very pretty, sir, indeed. Let's see now. According to this, you and Mr. Winter-set were alongside of Mr. Fosdyke, and Mr. Smallfield was going to and fro, between the three of you and Tom Clarke, Mrs. Cumber and Miss Cumber—who were out of the wood but at the head of the line of buckets. Yes. And behind you were the General, Ted Caper, Charlie Todd and Tom Bolton, with their backs towards you. So far, so good. Next, when you were all supposed to fall back, all the parties named were at work on the second gap, save and except you two. So that no one, really, was near enough to do the dirty deed except said parties. . . . And, finally, *this* is where the bodies was—were. Yes, indeed."

He looked up.

"If this is to be relied on, Sir Brian," he said, "then . . ."

He stopped. In the doorway, grey-haired, rubicund and smiling, stood Charlie Todd. He was in shirt-sleeves, rolled back to disclose a berry-brown right forearm, copiously tattooed, ending in a big brown fist clutching a pint glass of cider.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said heartily. "Good morning, Arnold. Busy detectin', I see? Don't let me interrupt you."

He lifted his glass and drank slowly, maintaining the steady gaze of his protuberant eyes upon them all, above the rim. Thrust finished his beer and rose to his feet. A dark-blue blur went past the window.

"Ah," said Thrust, with great geniality of tone. "Here's Inspector Goodman. No need to wait any longer, I think."

Goodman, having rested his bicycle against the wall of the inn, now entered the room, his eyes big with portents.

"We're all ready for you, Inspector," said Thrust. "You're right on time. Have a drink before we go?"

Thrust had the advantage over Charlie Todd, whose back was to the open doorway framing the burly and puzzled local inspector, upon whom all the London detective's breezy improvisations were quite lost until Thrust took swift advantage of the

half-turn instinctively made by Charlie Todd, to bestow upon Goodman a huge, music-hall wink which would have put a bull-elephant wise.

"Er, no, I think not," said Goodman, and preceded them out into the lane, where he retrieved his bicycle and wheeled it over to the parked car.

"You didn't want to let on to Charlie Todd that you weren't expecting me?" he said, resting one elbow on the smooth-worn saddle as the others seated themselves in the shining machine. He clicked his dentures once or twice like a man with a pronounced impediment to speech trying to start himself off. "Two pieces of news I've brought," he added, and lifted a free hand to seize the sprouting hair projecting from his right ear.

"Listen, Inspector," said Thrust. "There isn't much time—and there's going to be even less, soon. Things are on the move. We'd like you and your chaps to find out exactly where all the following people were at exactly 10.40 this morning. Mr. Fosdyke; Mrs. Cumber; Ann Cumber; Charlie Todd; General Sir Benet Caulfield—who lives somewhere in the neighbourhood, I'm told—and Mr. Smallfield, old Ranaldshaw's partner. Where does *he* live, d'you know?"

Goodman released the imprisoned hairs. He managed to look both shocked and pleased.

"Up the road, a piece," he said. "Over to Crackham Hill way. Big house on the downs. I take it you suspect all these people of murdering old Ranaldshaw in the middle of the night?" he asked sarcastically.

"That's right," said Thrust. "And of attempting to murder Mr. Winterset, and making it look like a road accident. And of attempting to murder Mr. Winterset and Sir Brian, in the wood at Gallop Mile, yesterday, making it look like an accident due to the fire. And of attempting to murder Mr. Winterset and Sir Brian and *me*, at twenty to eleven this morning, without, as far as I can see, bothering to make it look like anything, except just murder."

"It's a pretty tall order in murders, that," remarked Goodman, clicking slightly. "While we're on the subject, the Sussex police are just wondering how to account for an assortment of murdered people Sir Brian left on their hands. They're not worried much, owing to what they found on the bodies, but they say they'd like a word with Sir Brian as soon as possible."

"Did they use the word 'murder'?" demanded Sir Brian

Conway, K.C., opening wide, steady, blue-green eyes upon the inspector.

"Not exactly, sir," said Goodman, "not exactly the actual word, like. But there it is. They've four very dead bodies to account for, if you include the two they found in a little shed off the Lingfield road."

"I see," said Conway, "though I rather think *those* two were in Surrey, you know."

"Yes, they were. But the Surrey police, they said Kent and Sussex seemed to be doing pretty well, as far as they could judge, and they requested Sussex to take 'em back over the county border, and carry on with the good work. Said they didn't see any point in coming in on the job, not when it seemed to be, in a manner of speaking, wholesale business. And the second thing I have to tell you is that the manager of the County and Weald Bank, down in Heavenridge Town, has been on the 'phone to me to say that Mrs. Cumber presented a very large cheque on Saturday morning, an hour before closing-time. Four thousand pounds, cash, it was. Signed by Mr. Ranaldshaw."

"Aha," said Thrust, sticking out his chin.

"Four thousand?" exclaimed Arnold involuntarily.

"I hope the manager met it," said Conway. "Perfectly good. The old man didn't die until Sunday night."

"He couldn't meet it," said Goodman. "He gave her five hundred on account."

"Wait a minute," said Arnold. "This is a quaint transaction, *if* you like. Apart from it being highly unlikely that he'd give her a cheque for four thousand quid, it's still more unlikely that he'd give her an open cheque. How did she get hold of it? Why did she take it to the County and Weald? Where does she bank, herself?"

"Now, now, Mr. Winterset," said Goodman, clicking furiously in his delight at being able to return to his habitual official manner of almost complete non-co-operation, "these are the questions to which we all want the answers. I take it you are in a position to know something of the late Mr. Ranaldshaw's affairs?"

"I know all about his bally affairs, financially," said Arnold. "Come off it, Inspector, for Pete's sake. Hadn't I better go down to the town and see this manager?" he asked Conway.

"Yes, pal," said the baronet, "you had. And so had I, and so had Thrust. I suggest we go forthwith, leaving Inspector

Goodman to get on with his local investigations into the movements of the Murder Gang. And then, I suppose, we'd better go on and see the Sussex cops. Right, Thrust?"

"Right, Sir Brian," said Thrust, tilting his hat over his eyes, and leaning back in his seat. "Inspector," he added earnestly, as the car's eight cylinders sighed to be gone, "don't let on about this morning's attack on us. Just ask where those people were, and how they can prove it. I've every reason to believe that nobody at all, save we three, and the person who tried to bump us off, and, of course, anybody else who may be an accessory before or after the fact, knows a thing about it."

"Good," said the inspector, with real enthusiasm. He was sufficiently a policeman to appreciate the strength of this position, from the standpoint of the investigating officer—indeed, it was precisely upon this technique of pretended omniscience that he was wont to base his terrifying examination of suspected poachers and careless drivers. He turned his bicycle round in the road, and as Conway's car moved off mounted with dignity and rode away.

As they slid downhill past the little railway station bowered in roses, and ran out on the straight southward road towards Heavenridge, the three men in the car were silent and even a trifle solemn.

"Loose ends, you know," said Conway, as they reached the first few straggling houses on the outskirts of the little town. "Lots of 'em in this case, I fear. For example, what is Mrs. Cumber up to, now that she seems to have dispossessed herself of the encumbrance of a husband? And where the devil has said husband got to? And what, if anything, could be reckoned a motive for murder on the part of J.F.F., and old Sir Benet Caulfield, and the late Mr. Ranaldshaw's partner, the red-faced Yorkshireman?"

"Here's the County and Weald, on the left," said Arnold. Conway drew up outside an ornate building faced in worn, grey stone, with mullioned windows bearing stained glass embellished with white horses, and the secretary of Ranaldshaws Limited pushed open the door and stalked into a dark, pleasantly odorous interior. He felt very assured and competent, dealing with banks, for this was his own craft and pride; as by right, he assumed the leadership of the expedition, privately amazing both Thrust and Conway.

"Good morning," he said to a face like that of a thin old sheep, thrown back in order to bring them all into focus through gold spectacles poised uncertainly at the extremity of a long, blunt

nose. "I am Arnold Winterset, of Ranaldshaw's. This is Sir Brian Conway, K.C., and this is Detective-Inspector Thrust, of Scotland Yard. May we see the manager, please?"

"Certainly, Mr. Winterset, certainly," bleated the aged slave of that financial institution, holding before him his long white hands, with the fingers drooped, at about the level of his waistcoat opening, which framed the voluminous folds of a black silk cravat. "Please wait one moment—just one moment. I'm sure Mr. Baines will be ready to see you. One moment, one moment. . . ."

Stooping his head forward with a nibbling movement which enabled him to look at them afresh over the rim of his spectacles, he tottered to a door behind his counter and vanished. He reappeared almost at once and lifted a flap in the counter for them to pass through to the sacred portal. They filed into a surprisingly vast chamber with splendid, storied oriel windows open upon a brilliance of grass and flowers. Behind a very fine old desk sat a youngish, plumpish man with horn-rims, a very cosy and jolly and persistently cheerful bank manager who rose jerkily as they entered and waved fat hands about, directing them towards high, carved chairs of startling newness, very hideous.

"Good morning," said Arnold. "We understand that a cheque drawn by the late Mr. Ranaldshaw was presented for payment here last Saturday morning by Mrs. Cumber, his niece by marriage, and we would like to discuss the transaction."

"Morning," exclaimed the manager. "Lovely weather—good for the gardens, what? Sir Brian Conway—Mr. Winterset—Inspector Thrust? Sit down, sit down. The cheque, now. Rather a whopper, what? Four thousand! Eh? I'd better tell you all I know about it, what?"

"Yes, please," said the new, cold-faced, precise Mr. Winterset, taking out spectacles and fitting them on. He gave a last, gentle touch to the bridge, and stared at Mr. Baines.

"Mrs. Cumber has no account with us, you understand? Banks over the way. No idea of her standing, and all that. Know who she is, of course. The late Mr. Ranaldshaw—heard from Goodman about his sad death—shocking thing—banked with County and Weald, among others. All the others, what? He used this branch, as you probably know, Mr. Winterset, for purely local transactions. Nothing to do with the firm. In—out. In—out. That sort of thing. Tradespeople and so on. Well, Mrs. Cumber came in on Saturday morning—very busy time in a country town like this. Presented—this."

He held up, between thumb and forefinger, a narrow, rectangular strip of mauve-coloured paper.

"'Pay Georgette Cumber—four thousand pounds.' Crossed cheque, but crossing 'opened', and initialled by drawer. Signature all right—swear to it. Mrs. Cumber perfectly well known. No question arises, of course not. Only thing is, we haven't four thou. in the place! Well, we might have scraped it together, I mean—but dash it—we had an hour of business still before us, what?'"

Nobody spoke. Unabashed, Mr. Baines proceeded with his simple tale.

"Said to her, 'My dear Mrs. Cumber, this is really most awkward, such a *very* large sum, what?' She said—I remember her exact words: 'I'll say it is, Mr. Baines—it gave me the shock of my life. I'm perfectly frank with you, I was terribly hard up. My uncle is helping me out. But four thousand—*whew!*' Her exact words, gentlemen. What could we do? I suggested taking it—ah—across the road, what? Pay it in at her own bank, draw what she needed. Know what she said? 'Mr. Baines, I'm not in terribly good odour over there. Of course, I'm not overdrawn as much as this, but about a thousand. And, frankly, I think they might be a bit unpleasant with me. They wouldn't know Mr. Ranaldshaw's signature and they might want to clear the cheque before paying me. And, Mr. Baines, I have exactly sevenpence-halfpenny in my bag. I was relying on this cheque—that's why I begged him not to send it to me crossed.'"

Mr. Baines paused, certain, this time, that his audience would be moved to murmurs of surprise. He might have been talking to blocks or stones or worse than senseless things, however, for any reaction he provoked on the three countenances confronting him. He coughed briskly, and continued:

"I at once went to the counter and took five hundred pounds, in ones—absolutely fresh notes, still in their wrappers—gave them to her, and wrote out a receipt for her, which she signed. I then signed a cheque, myself, made out to Georgette Cumber, open cheque, for three thousand five hundred. She thanked me, said she'd pay it in over the road right away. Good morning—and out she went."

"You have the numbers of those notes?" said Thrust.

Mr. Baines seized a slip of paper from a tray of stationery standing before him on his handsome desk, dotted down some figures, rose, leaned, and held it out to Thrust, who took it with murmured thanks.

"May I see Mr. Ranaldshaw's cheque, please?" said Arnold, ominously.

Mr. Baines rose again, leaned, and passed to Arnold the mauve-tinted slip of printed paper with the blue oval die-stamp upon it.

"Thank you very much," said Arnold, and examined it with a fierce stare. "Forged," he added, calmly.

"Forged, Mr. Winterset? I am as certain of Mr. Ranaldshaw's signature as I am of my own," said Mr. Baines, equally calm.

"The signature is perfectly in order. The amount has been altered."

Mr. Baines sat very still for a moment; slowly, then, all his briskness gone, he rose, moved round the desk, and stood behind Arnold's chair, stooping to look over his shoulder at the cheque.

"He drew this cheque for one thousand pounds," said Arnold implacably, putting his thumb over the initial letter of the word 'four'. Perfectly plainly, it then read 'one'. "You see? Then, two quick strokes of what looks remarkably like Mr. Ranaldshaw's pen, and his royal-blue ink—and the figure 1 becomes a figure 4. He wrote that kind of figure 4. And he wrote that kind of letter F. But he didn't write Mrs. Cumber a cheque for four thousand. He wrote her a cheque for one thousand. I stood behind him while he did it!"

Conway had risen from his chair and stood now behind Arnold, also looking over his shoulder at the small piece of printed paper of a standard kind issued by that bank to all its thousands of customers, and capable, under the rheumatic fingers of Charles Shadforth Winter Ranaldshaw, of translation into untold sums of currency of the realm, legal tender for the payment of any amount.

"It's that queer Victorian handwriting," said Conway. "The 'n' is exactly like a 'u'; look at the 'n' and the 'u' in 'thousand', identical; and the 'e', carelessly written, is very like an 'r'. The loop of the 'e' disappears, doesn't it, when it joins the down-stroke high up, like that? See the small 'r' in 'Cumber'. And he left room for the capital F, too. The alteration of 'r' to '4' is terribly easy, since he left room for it, on the left-hand side. You may well be correct, young Arnold, but I'm bound to say it would be difficult to get a jury to believe you. If you want my opinion, without charge, I'd say the bank will be upheld, and old Ranaldshaw's account, or his estate, rather, will have to stump up four thousand smackers on this yurr scrap of paper."

"I'm delighted to hear it, Sir Brian," said Mr. Baines, drawing from the outside breast-pocket of his neat black jacket a folded piece of white silk and lightly dabbing his rosy temples.

"I think I had better take possession of that cheque, if you have no objection, Mr. Baines," observed Thrust.

"None. I'll prepare a receipt for you to sign," said the manager, and seated himself again at his desk. "I shall make a full report to my head office today. May I quote you, Sir Brian?"

Thrust stuck out his chin. Arnold smiled. Conway considered for a moment.

"I'm afraid I can't stop you," he said at last, frankly. "It's my usual Irish forthcomingness. I only speak right on—like Mark Antony. You heard me. You can put me on oath. It will just about settle it, I'm inclined to think."

"It doesn't matter a scrap," said Arnold. "Assuming that Mr. Cumber and Mr. Smallfield take over the business under the old man's will, as we've always been given to understand, I'm sure neither of them would want to dispute the matter."

"Yes, but——" began Thrust, but the Chief of Clonmally, without changing the genial expression of his features, succeeded in applying the pressure of his brogue shoe to the inspector's booted instep, and he ceased his utterance. Conway made graceful *adieux* to Mr. Baines and to the aged cashier, who watched the three men depart, first through his lenses and then with naked eyes of a watery blue over their tops. . . .

"Hell," succinctly remarked Detective-Inspector Thrust, C.I.D., seated in the rear of the open car bowling southward from Heavenridge in a sunny air.

"Don't fret, good Thrust," said Conway. "If it is necessary to produce that cheque as a forgery, as part of the Crown case for murder, we'll produce it. We shall have other evidence, you know, if Georgette Cumber is to be indicted. I'll admit that three thousand pounds is ample motive."

"I'll say it's ample," growled Thrust. "Especially when you're overdrawn a thousand. More than a thousand—debtors always understate. Man, that cheque for a thousand was hardly any use to the dame! Hardly cleared her! She told Baines they weren't fond of her any more at her own bank. Mr. Winterset, are you positive about this forgery?"

"Absolutely bally certain," said Arnold. "I'm so certain, in fact, that I'll lay three to one that the counterfoil in the old man's cheque-book at the office says one thousand, not four."

"Ha!" said Conway, spinning the wheel lightly as they took a sharp curve on the Lingfield road. "Now, would that be a clever forgery, do you consider? Leaving the stub to contradict the cheque? Bound to be found out, surely?"

"Yes, but after the drawer's death," said Thrust. "Case against her wouldn't be any stronger than you say it is now, would it? And she'd have the money. A fate accomplee, as you might put it."

They proceeded for a mile or two before Conway spoke again.

"Motive accepted, Thrust," he remarked. "How about the means? How d'you figure she could have poisoned the old man?"

"That's a problem facing us whoever we think did it," said Thrust. "I think we shall find that some one of this crowd we have our eyes on found the opportunity to change the old man's bottle of branded aspirins for made-up tablets of arsenic, in some form or other. They all knew of the huge doses he took at bedtime. Another thing, though. Don't think I told you this. They were all of 'em together at Tom Clarke's place, for bridge, late Saturday afternoon. After they'd finished playing bridge, at Gallop Mile, on Saturday evening, and just as Ranaldshaw was going out to his car for the short ride home to Gables, that Fosdyke produced a bottle of some new rheumatic mixture, and recommended the old chap to take a dose. It seems he'd try anything once. Fosdyke poured out a biggish dose in a tumbler, laced it with proof whisky, and Ranaldshaw poured it down. He made a very wry face over it, too. Do you think that could have been Fowler's solution, sir? You know, it's disguised with cinnamon and things."

"It might be, Thrust. I'd rather have a good medico on the job. It widens the field slightly, but only to include those members on our little list who had no ready opportunity to change the wee bottle of aspirins. What does Dr. Heavibody say about those tablets?"

"He says they are 5-grain tablets of acetyl-salicylic acid mixed with arrowroot, exactly as they are supposed to be. So whoever changed bottles, changed 'em back again. And how would that be possible? No, I plump for Mr. Fosdyke's rheumatism cure. He, or Mrs. Cumber, or the General, or Mr. Smallfield, or Ann Cumber, could just possibly have done it that way—perhaps by changing *that* bottle, or doping it. It would be perfectly easy to change that bottle back again, when the old chap had gone home. All five of 'em were in the house. All, except

Mr. Smallfield and the General, are staying there. Those two were in on the bridge-game."

"That lets out Charlie Todd," said Arnold.

"Oh, no, it doesn't," said Thrust. "Charlie Todd drove the old man home from the station when he arrived on Saturday, and had the baggage in his care. He took it upstairs. The aspirin was in one of those bags. Easy for him to change bottles while he was unpacking in the bedroom. And don't forget, Charlie Todd was the only one on our list known to have been at Gables on Sunday night. So he's actually the only one on the list who we *know* might have changed the bottles *back*."

"Motive?" said Conway, dispassionately.

"Revenge, perhaps, according to village gossip duly reported by Goodman. He had a grouse against the old man over some horse-race last year."

"Thin," said Conway.

"Yes," agreed Thrust. "But then, he might have been acting for one of the others, you see."

"That's more like it, perhaps. One, or two, or three, or four, or all five, would you say?"

"I think that will depend on how many of 'em we can associate with these four corpses we're on our way to visit," said Thrust, with a grim look about his lower jaw. "This crime's only thirty-eight hours old, remember. Someone set that precious gang on the job of eliminating Mr. Winterset. Who? One of 'em, I guess. The one who had a second go, in the wood, yesterday, and a third go, this morning. Once we get a line on those attempted murders, we can narrow the field a bit. And that's exactly when we'll have to watch out for ourselves."

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"This is a rare old do, if you like, sir," said Superintendent Cox, opening the door of his office and inviting his three visitors to precede him. He carefully closed the door and marched to his desk. Still standing, he faced them, upstanding, very heavy, his large pink face showing some concern. "You don't want to see the bodies, I suppose?" he asked.

Conway shook his black head, and Thrust said, "No, Superintendent."

Superintendent Cox sighed lightly, like a man laden with cares he feels are not rightly his own. He sat down and contemplated a number of objects ranged on his desk-top.

"We've identified 'em all," he said. "They're a Brighton race-gang. A very bad lot indeed. Long records of violence against every one of them. Just look at this little exhibition. Razors and tape, knuckle-dusters, coshes, revolvers, bottles of vitriol . . . nice load of stuff to find in the pockets of men who were accepted by some of my own chaps as members of the Flying Squad from the Yard!"

"Any papers?" asked Conway.

"Yes, Sir Brian. A few. I've got those here, too. Faked identity cards, stolen police passes." He chuckled drearily. "I expect someone in the Criminal Investigation Department will be for the high jump, eh, Inspector? Losing your papers is just about the worst crime you can commit when you're a policeman. The leader of this lot—the fellow you disposed of personally, Sir Brian—rejoiced in the name of Gasher Gibbs. The chap with him was Lefty Short. The two killed in the car-smash were James Huggins, a local no-good who joined the others a few months ago in Brighton, and Crook Willis, a con-man and black-mailer who used to work the hotels on the front. They're a very good riddance, of course, but I have been a bit worried about—er—accounting for their deaths.

"Now, sir, just take a look at this, will you?"

He passed over the desk a sumptuous wallet of gleaming black morocco, monogrammed in gold. Conway accepted it, opened it, and began to examine its contents. Beyond the uncurtained window lay a paved yard walled all round in brick, a trap for blatant sunshine; desultory flies cruised the still air of the superintendent's office; the breathing of three men was faintly audible, as Conway took out, one by one, folded papers, a book of stamps, much paper currency, photographs, and printed cards; each item as he scrutinized it was laid down on the edge of the superintendent's desk in one or the other of two little piles—a biggish pile, and a smallish pile. At last Conway looked up, whistling a soundless tune. He leaned back in his chair, eyes on the ceiling, then reached out a big, brown hand and gathered up the smaller pile. It consisted of a sheet of thin, much-folded paper, three tiny, nearly square, glossy black-and-white photographic prints, and a torn, ruled page from a pocket notebook.

"Where did you find this interesting exhibit?" asked the baronet, indicating the black wallet.

"It was in the saloon car—but I doubt if we would ever have found it if we'd searched in the ordinary way. The car burst into flames, you know, when it crashed on the village green. It burnt

out almost completely. In one of the door pockets was a flat steel box, let into the panelling, and making a secret cache down all one side of the pocket. It opened with a key, enabling the user to slide the front up and down, and to secure it when it was up. Inside that box was the wallet, and nothing else."

Conway unfolded again the flimsy sheet of paper, studied it, and passed it to Thrust. The inspector propped a pair of horn-rims on his pugnacious nose, and read carefully the eight or ten lines of typescript on the paper; he grinned, and handed it to Arnold. Arnold read it, and blushed slightly.

"They had me taped, didn't they?" he murmured.

"They certainly did, Mr. Winterset. You, and your cottage, and your way home to it from the drill-hall, eh? Couldn't mistake that description. That was their orders, as you might say."

Thrust accepted the three photographic prints, and blushed in his turn, hardened police-officer though he was. He quickly passed them to Arnold.

"Well!" exclaimed Arnold. "Mrs. Cumber!"

"Yep," said Conway. "Now, the question is—do those photographs suggest a surprising intimacy between Gasher Gibbs and Georgette, or are they just part of the Gasher's blackmailing stock-in-trade?"

"Meaning Gasher may either have got hold of 'em with an eye to future business, or taken 'em when with the lady himself, on what you might call pleasure bent?" said the superintendent, blandly.

"Or both. Two birds with one miniature camera-shot," said Thrust.

"She's asleep," said Arnold gallantly. "She didn't know these pictures were being taken. You can see she's fast asleep."

"I think you're right, Arnold," said Conway. "I mean, I think she was asleep. And there's nothing, of course, either indictable, or particularly immoral, in lying, attractively posed, on a silken counterpane with the sunshine streaming over you. But do you see the furnishings?"

"It's—it's a hotel bedroom, isn't it? Yes—of course, and whoever took the picture made sure the room could be identified as such, I suppose, with those initials on the corner of the pillow."

"And the telephone. In the close-up, you can read the number and the extension! And the sign, visible through the window in the third picture! I think it's obviously blackmail, Superintendent."

"Maybe. Well, it won't come off now, sir. And it does, it seems to me, connect one of the persons up at Heavenridge with the deceased Gasher."

"Sure it does. All we have to do now is connect this description of Mr. Winterset's appearance and movements with someone at Heavenridge, and this little sketch-plan likewise, and the job's done. Easy as that. *If* that's easy, which I doubt."

"This leaf from some notebook, now," said Thrust, scanning it. "What do you make of it, Sir Brian?"

"What do *you* make of it?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid. Some sort of crude sketch-plan, it seems to be."

"It is a sketch-plan——"

The superintendent's telephone interrupted their low-voiced conversation.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," said that officer, settling back into his chair and raising the instrument from its rest. He listened with a face full of bucolic tolerance, patience and calm.

"Very good, Inspector, I should say," he remarked, almost negligently. "Perhaps you ought to speak to the Detective-Inspector; he's here with me. One moment."

He held out the receiver at arm's length.

"Goodman," he said.

Thrust strode forward, pulling his chair with him, sat down at the edge of the desk and had his fat, elastic-bound notebook and a pencil ready for action even as he said "Thrust" to the instrument. He said no more for several minutes, but wrote busily. "Good man," he concluded. "I'll be ringing you back. Wait for the call. G'-bye." His jaw was champing furiously.

"Now, gentlemen," said the detective-inspector, "let's get down to cases. Briefly, this is our position: we have a respected and wealthy gentleman, a big bookmaker, poisoned with a concentrated dose of arsenic between the time he left a bridge-party at a neighbouring house and the following morning, when his deaf housekeeper found him dead. The people at the party, at Gallop Mile, were a Mr. James de Forrest Fosdyke, of Fosdyke Dyke, a nearby house; the deceased's partner in business, a Mr. Samuel Smallfield; another neighbour living in retired and somewhat reduced circumstances, General Sir Benet Caulfield; and their host, Mr. Tom Clarke. Others staying in the house were the dead man's niece by marriage, Mrs. Georgette Cumber, and this lady's husband's sister, Miss Ann Cumber. The only people actually in

the dead man's house on the night of his death were the deaf housekeeper, Mrs. Potter, and a Charlie Todd. On the face of it, then, all these had the opportunity to poison the old man, either by concocting or subsequently dosing a drink of some rheumatism cure given to him when the bridge-party broke up, or by substituting for his normal bedtime dose of aspirins a bottle of arsenical tablets, *and subsequently changing back the bottles.*

"The evidence in the dead man's bedroom, in the shape of a note left by his bedside, and what seems to be an incomplete last will and testament on the reverse side of it, strongly suggests that a named person, John Cumber, his nephew and previous principal legatee, came into his room, watched him die, and removed certain securities from a safe there. Nothing has been heard of this nephew, or seen of those securities, since. What seems an extraordinary oversight, however, on the part of a very clever murderer, is the absence of any pen with which the dead man could possibly have written that note—which otherwise seems an exceedingly realistic specimen of his normal handwriting if his physical condition at the time of its supposed writing is taken into consideration.

"Subsequent to this murder, Mr. Winterset has been the subject of some very determined attempts at murder—and I would say it's a reasonable assumption that the perpetrators of these attempts had been instructed to carry them out because during the night he saw John Cumber, probably at the very time he was *supposed* to be in his uncle's bedroom, apparently sleeping in the back seat of Mrs. Cumber's car, parked in an out-of-the-way place, roughly midway between Gallop Mile and Fosdyke Dyke. Later still, Sir Brian Conway, and myself, were the subject of other murderous attempts when with Mr. Winterset, although the four men known to have been responsible for the attempts on Mr. Winterset alone were on those occasions dead. So that, again, it seems likely that the four men were acting under orders from another person, which person has been acting independently since their deaths."

Thrust paused and looked round the room at the attentive faces of his hearers.

"I think that's a fairly complete summary of the facts, and of some almost indisputable inferences we are bound to make from them," he said.

"It certainly is, Thrust," said Conway at once. "Admirably put. It covers all likely means of murdering Mr. Ranaldshaw,

and includes all likely suspects. Go on. What about motives? And opportunities? And the present whereabouts of John Cumber?"

"I agree, Sir Brian, that John Cumber, the obvious and perhaps the intended suspect, must be confronted with these facts, as a first step. *His* motive is a pretty obvious one, since he is his uncle's heir, and his opportunity is covered by the accusation in the apparently spurious death-note. We must know his movements in order to check that. Next, I come to some motives other than John Cumber's.

"First, Georgette Cumber. It seems she has been receiving an allowance from John Cumber since her separation from him; that allowance was stopped a week ago. She was overdrawn at the bank and had pressing creditors. Hence, apparently, her desperate appeal to her husband's uncle, in answer to which Mr. Winterset saw him sign a cheque for £1,000. The forgery of that cheque in such a way that she was enabled to draw, in effect, £4,000, constitutes a good motive for murder, since in a Court of Law the principal witness against her on the forgery charge would be the drawer. She cashed the cheque on a Saturday, and the drawer was dead by Monday, when the banks would again be open for business. We must find out why her husband stopped her allowance, when and where she appealed to his uncle for help, and how she might have administered poison to him. She apparently didn't know he was coming to Gallop Mile on Saturday night. At any rate she didn't come into the room while he was there. It is a significant fact that—er—rather unusually artistic snaps of this lady were found among the effects of the leader of the hired gang which was attempting to eliminate Mr. Winterset. That argues a connection between her and this gang—who, as we believe, were hired by the murderer.

"Second, Mr. Fosdyke. This gentleman has been living beyond his slender means for a long time. He is of those who are described as having nothing a year, paid quarterly. Somehow, he manages. He was, however, a member of a syndicate, with Sir Benet Caulfield and the late Mr. Ranaldshaw, owning the colt Spoof. The colt was picked by Fosdyke, in company with Caulfield, neither of whom was in a position, it seems, to pay for the animal's purchase, though his feed, his training, entrances, and so on, were apparently being financed by them. You see? The terms on which this syndicate was based were truly astounding—they positively put a premium on homicide under certain circumstances. In the

event of the demise of any of the contracting parties, the survivors were a committee empowered to deal with the colt's future. The *value* of the colt, of course, would accrue in equal thirds to them and to the estate of the dead man—but in a case like that of Spoof, the cash value is by no means the only value."

"I should say not," said Superintendent Cox, warmly. "In these parts he's reckoned to be the only Derby certainty ever known or heard of. He's worth every penny of fifty thousand—sixty thousand quid, that colt!"

(*Murder—arson—rape—or robbery—for sixty thousand quid, 'e says . . .* said a fluting, old voice in Arnold's head.)

"Exactly. So it's conceivable that Fosdyke—and Caulfield—being hard up, wanted to sell that colt and take their shares. And that Ranaldshaw was determined to hang on to him at least until the Derby. And, also, that he was unwilling to buy them out for something in the near neighbourhood of forty thousand, when what *he* wanted was *control* of the colt, for bookmaking purposes. Certainly, motive is suggested by all this."

"Agreed, agreed, agreed," cried Conway.

"Ranaldshaw was a hard man. There's another nasty story Goodman has got hold of: it seems that Sir Benet Caulfield asked his advice about settling what little resources he had—some £10,000—into a business for his soldier son to come back to from Burma. He had realized all his assets, cut down his own living expenses, and was set on establishing this business, by means of a big shareholding, for the boy to come back to after the defeat of Japan. Ranaldshaw took the money, unloaded shares on the poor old General, and left Caulfield with about £500 worth, or less. Market dropped to nothing. He said he was sorry, offered to take the boy on, and so forth—and Caulfield thought it was just bad luck. But was it? And might Caulfield have somehow got wise to it, if it wasn't?"

"Umm," said Conway. "Wants looking into carefully, that one. They were playing bridge together the night the old man died."

"True. But it's a line of enquiry. That leaves us, of possible or likely suspects other than Cumber, only Mr. Smallfield and Miss Cumber. Either presumably could have administered poison by doping Fosdyke's rheumatism mixture—which was left on the hall table at Gallop Mile all the evening—or, in the case of Smallfield, perhaps by substituting the bottle of aspirins at the firm's office in Berkeley Square, where the old man kept them on his desk. Motive is pretty thin, however. No substantial difference

would be made to Smallfield's position in the business if Ranaldshaw died, since the old man's holding would go to his nephew. There seems to have been no friction between them. Ann Cumber would hardly be likely to kill her uncle so that her brother John would step into his place, I feel. But both these parties could have murdered him, and could have attacked Sir Brian and Mr. Winterset."

"I rather think, Inspector Thrust," said Arnold, "that I, or anybody at the office, could have substituted the aspirin bottle on his desk, if it was done on Saturday morning. I wasn't at the office, but I believe the old man was, on Saturday. His habit was well known. He used to take a big dose at night, and a dose latish in the morning if he found himself bad—which in his case meant practically incapacitated. It was safe to say that *after* the morning dose he wouldn't take any more until the heavy bedtime dose to enable him to get a good night's rest. He was constantly talking about the matter."

"Good," said Thrust, making a rapid note; "that enables us to get a line on the bottle-changing by checking who was in the office on Saturday morning. He kept the bottle always with him, I suppose?"

"That's right," said Arnold. "What about Charlie Todd? Did he have any real motive?"

"Charlie Todd, like Smallfield and Miss Cumber, must be kept in mind until we're sure they didn't slosh you and Sir Brian in the wood yesterday. But Charlie Todd's only known motive was plain revenge on his employer over some racing *coup* the old fellow pulled a year ago. Very thin—although, of course, Charlie hadn't seen his boss from the day of that race until he sent Mrs. Potter down to open up Gables again and came down himself last Saturday. A more likely explanation, according to Goodman, would be Charlie's devotion to Fosdyke, who employed him from boyhood at Fosdyke Dyke until the money ran so low that he found him the job at Gables. Todd worked for Fosdyke's father at the Dyke, years ago."

Conway rose and stretched himself.

"You were looking at that little old sketch-plan, just before Goodman came across with these mixed and mysterious motives," he said. "Have another go, pal."

"You were always the one for action, sir," said Thrust, picking up the flimsy, ruled sheet. He stared at it, corrugating his pink brows beneath the neat, fair quiff of his hair.

Arnold sat, very hot, on his hard chair, and thought very hard about Ann Cumber . . . hair of coppery-gold, eyes as blue as the flax flowers, gold-fringed . . . Ann . . . could they possibly suspect she might be mixed up in all this? Conway, his black head bent, wrote busily, standing at a corner of the superintendent's desk. Thrust sighed.

"It tells me nothing, still, Sir Brian," he said.

"It tells me plenty," said Conway. "Look—don't think I haven't given concentrated thought to your beautifully compressed summary of the case to date, Thrust. I have, and I think it was timely. Here are some observations of mine, indicating what I think are profitable and important lines of investigation for you and the police machine to tackle. I read: *'We must know the movements of all suspects for at least twelve hours before the bridge-game began, for all the time from the break-up of the game to, say, noon next day (the Sunday), and all the time from then until 10.40 this morning.'* Look at that sketch again. . . ."

He laid a firm forefinger on the paper.

"That circle, I think, is our chalk-pit, lately so nearly the scene of our untimely joint demise or passing on. That's the place, you see, where John Cumber was *last seen*. He's not there now—and I don't think he was in a fit and proper state to leave by his own volition. I think he was inanimate. I think he was a Body. *That's* why they were told to get you, Arnold. You were looking at a dead man, in that car, at just about the time when that man was supposed to be in his uncle's bedroom, doing a murder!"

CHAPTER IV

"I revere the memory of Mr. F. as an estimable man and indulgent husband, only necessary to mention Asparagus and it appeared or to hint at any little delicate thing to drink and it came like magic in a pint bottle it was not ecstasy, but it was comfort."

—FLORA FINCHING.

"D'you mean," said Arnold, in wonder, "that you're going there by railway? Because the house is nearly a mile from the station, at the other end."

"Just so," said Conway, peeping out from beneath the red tarpaulin which covered them. "I want to approach John Cumber's detached residence by the least likely route and under cover of what have been called the velvet shades of holy night. Only thus, as I see it, do we stand a chance of achieving surprise. Surprise is a first essential for successful attack, isn't it?"

"Yes." Arnold lay down on his bed of sacks at the bottom of the railway truck and gazed at the patch of night sky visible through a space left by the artfully draped tarpaulin. "So they tell us in the Home Guard. But who are we going to surprise?"

"Dunno—unless it's ourselves. But methinks that there is organization behind all these manifestations of malice and mayhem which we've kind of kept bumping into since you, first, and then I, got involved in Old Ranaldshaw's untimely surcease from pain. Hullo, we're off."

To an accompaniment of blowing steam somewhere ahead of them, the line of trucks of which their refuge was the rearmost began to creep into motion.

"But why do you think John Cumber's house is the headquarters of this organization?" demanded Arnold.

"I don't so much think so, as hanker to know. It was only when I saw that sketch-plan that I understood how the body in the car, not to say the car itself, might have been removed from the chalk-pit. Don't you realize that all roads leading thence were being patrolled all that night? And that Mrs. Cumber's car, in which you saw the body, was seen on the road only this morning by one of Goodman's cops? Probably she drove to the bank in it, too. Well, how'd she regain possession, eh?"

Arnold pondered, watching the yellow stars overhead as the truck clicked over points out on to the main rail-track. . . . "She's in deep, that Mrs. Cumber, isn't she?" he said.

He sensed rather than saw Conway's grin.

"She certainly is," the baronet replied. "But I'm concerned about the sheer physical difficulty of moving the car and the body. And I think the railway provides an explanation. In that siding we've just left, not fifty yards from the chalk-pit, there's a mobile ramp, on wheels. And a line of trucks like this one is apparently run up there every evening and picked up, just as we've been picked up tonight, by a loco from Tonbridge. If the murderer knew that, and had the necessary manpower, he could have loaded the car direct on the railway, body and all."

"He *did* have the manpower, of course. That Brighton gang. But where and how could they off-load the car?"

"*That*, cock, is where your Uncle Brian has beaten the cops at their own job. I colloqued with the stationmaster at Heavenridge."

"Old Hethers, in the local?"

"Old Hethers, in the local. He tells me that this mixed local goods is hauled every night to a siding about eleven miles down the line, past Godstone, where it waits until 8.30 and is then hauled to Redhill goods-yard. Now, the said siding lies all along a pine-fence bordering Acorns—residence of John Cumber."

"I see. And the car could be driven quite openly, as soon as it was daylight, back to Heavenridge. Not much chance, either, that it would even be noticed, that time of the morning."

"Correct. The second point is that the police have visited Acorns in a routine enquiry for John Cumber. They found the place shut up. Only a taciturn gardener and a pack of dogs in residence. The gardener's story is that he and the rest of the outdoor staff had instructions that their master was abroad. The indoor staff have all returned to Cumber's London place. As the local police had no search-warrant, and no good excuse for taking one out, they simply reported all this to Goodman."

The moon was not due to rise for an hour. All Surrey lay lightless and apparently lifeless. The staring, green eyes of signal lamps invited them on, mile after creaking, smooth-rolling mile, past bridges and through cuttings. The two men had their heads out into the night air until a forbidding circle of scarlet somewhere near Godstone warned them that the train would stop; it went on again almost immediately, clanking sonorously, past deserted

platforms faintly lit; a darker mass against the night ahead of them caused Arnold to nudge his companion.

"Those," he said, "are John Cumber's woods."

"Were," said Conway.

"You're very sure," said Arnold, doubtfully.

"Certain," said the baronet. "Aha! We're taking a left-hand point. Golly! See that? A loading platform, me lad! Now, if only we *back* down this siding," after clearing the points, one of the last six trucks of this train will come alongside that platform . . . even so it is. Steady as she goes. Watch out for the goods guard—his van is in the centre. *Now!*"

Conway went low over the near end of the truck and jumped clear for the side of the track, landing on dry grass; Arnold followed him within a second or two.

"Get close to the fence," said Conway aloud, his tones drowned by the jarring and rumble down all the length of the train as the line of trucks clattered to a standstill. They found a slight declivity, running back from the track to a stout board fence. High trees beyond the overlapping planks made an impenetrable blackness. Far ahead of them, the locomotive made a plaintive call. Beyond the standing trucks, two shades darker than the night, a tall crane made a long arm against the sky. A nascent silver palpitated about the horizon to herald the approach of a moon which, Arnold knew, would be round and bright and full, casting shadows as seeming-dark as noonday's.

"Come on," muttered a voice in his ear. "We must be in the house before the moonlight is turned on. This fence is about ten feet high. I'll make a back for you to get astraddle."

"I'll make a back."

"Right."

Arnold felt the baronet's weight lifted from his stooped shoulders in the instant that he sank under its first impact. He straightened, and reached upward to grasp two firm hands held down to him. How Conway maintained his balance up there he never knew, but he felt himself drawn strongly aloft, scarce skimming the boards with his feet, and taken firmly about the waist. In a moment he was astride the narrow planking, which swayed slightly under its double load. His eyes could distinguish little.

"Going down," whispered Conway; the fence swayed. . . .

"Right," floated that disembodied voice from the darkness below. Arnold turned, somehow, over on his stomach, dropped his

legs, waited a moment hanging on his hands gripping the top of the fence, then found himself taken about the middle and lowered silently to earth. They moved forward, hands outstretched to find the tree-trunks, and almost instantly felt the ice-cold, sharply rectangular obstruction of iron bars.

"Blast!" breathed Conway. Arnold heard him moving about, very faintly. A hand came and touched delicately the back of his head, locating his ear, into which his companion spoke from a distance of not more than half an inch.

"This," said the voice, as though heard in a dream speaking from remote outer space, "is a perfect beast. It's high, and curved over and downward at the top, with sharp points. Give me your overcoat, will you?"

But Arnold stood as if rooted. Into his practical but unspeculative mind had come a sudden picture. He groped for Conway's ear and poured out in harsh whispers his memory of a single visit he had paid, on office affairs, to Acorns. All about the trim lawns and flower-beds surrounding the big house was a solid, high, box-hedge, pierced at only two points by gates. . . .

"Give me your overcoat," said the voice of leadership, in reply, and Arnold obeyed. He heard nothing more save for the faintest of scraping sounds, for a minute or more. What (he asked himself) was the use of all this? Again he felt a slight pressure on the back of his head.

"Make me a back again, will you?" said the thin whisper in his ear. "I'm going up the board fence again. I've found a bough which overhangs the railings. I've put coats on the top of the spikes, and when I'm on them I'll heave you over."

Conway went up into the night, a vague, black shape against the blackness, which poised for an instant swayingly on the creaking board fence, then launched itself across the strip of dark sky between the fence and the trees. Another creak, as a stout oak-bough took that flying weight, and Arnold moved irresolutely forward; muscular human paws gripped him and drew him swiftly up, all 140 pounds of him, to a platform of coats laid over the menacing curves of down-pointed, sharpened iron. In another second he had slipped down the inside of the iron fence. Conway joined him.

They moved off obliquely through the woods, making very little noise, but going very slowly, and with a caution that was amply rewarded when, with a frightful, metallic crash, the toothed steel jaws of a big man-trap came ringing together—biting im-

potently into the folds of an overcoat which Conway was thrusting forward ahead of their passage; he had always mistrusted, he said, in a sudden murmur made to the accompaniment of furious barking and baying of dogs somewhere in the silvering dusk in front of them, all landowners who double-fenced their estates at such elaborate expense. The first rim of the moon was over the edge of the horizon, and all the sky was brightening. The two invaders were nearly through the belt of woods and now pushed vigorously on, coming at last to a gravelly walk curving about the high, dark wall of box surrounding the house.

It *was* impenetrable—not naturally, but by the weaving through it of close-meshed barbed wire to a height of six feet from the ground.

"This place is a fortress," growled Conway, "but the fortress which can keep me out has not yet been devised. I wonder how long it will be before they let the dogs loose? What an unholy din! Come on!"

He began to run down the path. Arnold trotted faithfully at his heels. All Surrey seemed now to be party to their secret night-attack. Raised, calling voices, flickering lights, the raucous uproar of the dogs, danced upon the night in colour and in sound where a few moments earlier all had been an oblivious silence and darkness. They came soon upon a glare of white electricity silhouetting an arched gateway through the hedge, a gateway barred by closed gates of wrought iron. They halted, pressed deep into the box, as close as they dared go to the gate. A clump of running feet sounded, a key grated, the gates swung. Conway threw, forward and close to the trees facing the gateway, a dark object which landed softly in the grass and then began to make absurd noises . . . it sounded like clockwork (which it was) and it sounded like footsteps, and it flapped about, and it even seemed to make guttural exclamations. It was a machine of his own invention, calculated to divert the attention of ninety-nine watchmen or policemen out of every hundred with its almost-human suggestion of panic-stricken retreat. The man with a shotgun standing in the gateway ran out from the fortress. In a twinkling, Conway and Arnold slipped in; they went along the inside of the box-hedge now, crouchingly and running hard. The dogs stopped barking. Silence supervened.

The invaders lay pressed to the bosom of the friendly grass. They watched; they waited. A mutter of muffled curses heralded the return of the man with the shotgun. The iron gates creaked on

rusty hinges and a key turned with shrill protest in the lock. Under the brilliant electrics over the gateway, which turned the lawn and the leaves to vivid emerald, they saw a stout figure, the gun sloped at a military angle over one shoulder, tramp off down a gravelled drive towards the silver-grey bulk of the house. A dog barked with staccato insistence. The stout figure uttered a reassuring word, silencing it.

"Who's your fat friend?" whispered Conway.

"I think he's Allnut, the gardener," replied Arnold. "I seem to remember him."

"Oh, and do you remember that this house is guarded like a donjon keep? Or are these bizarre effects introduced to cover an international centre of horrid crime, all the same like a spy story?"

"I think it's just part of the bookmaking business," whispered the confidential secretary of Ranaldshaws Limited. "It's a funny game, the Turf. You make lots of enemies, of a not very gentle kind, sometimes. Mr. Cumber always had a Thing about burglars and so on."

"Well," said Conway's hoarse accents, "I don't feel this is the time or the place for a nice chat, pal. Some other time, perhaps. And place. Me, I'm going inside the mansion. All you have to do is to lie doggo. Leave all to your Uncle Brian. Your Uncle Brian, though he may not be a great man, knows the ins-and-outs of housebreaking as do few of his learned friends at the Bar, or behind bars. You're a sleeping partner. I absolutely rely on your being just here, nowhere else, no matter what. O.K.?"

"O.K.," breathed Arnold, considerably relieved, and settling comfortably on his stomach in the prescribed manner of all good infantrymen engaged on a piece of reconnaissance which turns out, against all expectations, to be a piece of cake. . . .

The barrister shuffled away across the lawn in the moonlight, on his stomach also, and moving with surprising speed. Soon, he was only an indistinct blur to Arnold. He circled some rose-beds and, still prone, surveyed without approval a tennis lawn islanded in a lake of mown grass, with no cover higher than a two-days-old daisy anywhere over its silvery expanse. Beyond the lawn was a terrace rising by steps among rocky banks of alpines to tall windows blank and bright. No lights, of course, showed anywhere in the house—but whether this was due to black-out only or to the fact that all the rooms were unoccupied it was impossible to tell. Then Conway realized that the house *must* be

black-out, like every other house in England that night, and he knew enough of the curse of black-out to understand that no one was likely to be able to see his approach to the terrace. Acting on this thought with a characteristic capacity to carry it to its logical conclusion, he rose and raced over the smooth turf, went up the terrace steps on flying, rubber-shod silent feet, and only paused when he stood, feeling unreasonably safe, close to one of the tall windows, his hand on the strong, inviting roundness of a drainpipe. He had noticed a first-floor balcony, and an interesting, old-fashioned configuration of masonry above it. He had always believed it better to enter a strange house at the top, and work down, if only because entry at ground-level was often, in his sordid experience, the cause of an enforced retreat, when discovery ensued, to a position lacking prospects upstairs. Within three minutes he was standing on the balcony rail, breathing hard. Within five minutes he was two storeys higher (where few householders are finicky about keeping windows properly caught), and was working his way, silent but blasphemous, past a row of what seemed to be maids' rooms, right under the eaves, each with a broad sill, amply embrasured, and each at no great distance, for an agile man, from its neighbour.

He deserved to find one open, and he did. Noiselessly he slid up the heavy sash-cord frame, and delicately placed one foot down upon linoleum. He had prayed that he might not find an elaborate blacking-out, with panelled frames, of every window in the house, and knew this prayer answered when the heavy curtain moved easily aside under his careful hand. Inside, he dropped the curtain back into place and stood motionless, listening intently.

The air of the room touched his nostrils with the curious deadness of an uninhabited place. He could hear nothing. Slowly, sliding one foot at a time cautiously over a worn carpeting, he advanced into impenetrable blackness, finger-tips outstretched before him. His knee touched something hard. His hand followed it, feeling the sharp edge of an iron bedstead and a mattress rolled across bare springs, as when a careful chatelaine leaves the husk of her house tidy and dry behind her on closing it for a season. Reassured, he went on, met a wall, found a door, opened it with elaborate precaution, sidled through, and turned to his right along a dark passage leading to the front of the house. At the end of the passage was a curtained window and a stairhead. He climbed down the stairs backwards in the thick gloom, on his

hands and knees, for silence's sake. He had already turned a corner thus, thinking. 'This is the servants' stair, there's probably a door,' when he looked over his shoulder. There *was* a door, and there was a tiny sliver of light at its base. And quite distinctly, he heard beyond it moderately rapid footsteps going over thick pile, and the faint click of another door closing.

So! The empty house—shut up, its servitors sent to London—was inhabited by businesslike and uninhibited footfalls. Conway tried the door, and, of course, it was locked.

An eye to the keyhole showed him that the key was in place. Smiling in the dark, he reached into his hip pocket for a small leather case containing instruments of price . . . he turned the key, without a sound, but just as the wards rotated, he most unfortunately allowed it to drop. It would have made more noise than it did had not a door somewhere beyond his door opened audibly just as the key fell. Conway crouched by his keyhole, breathing in, and peering out. . . .

A quick flurry of greyish cloth, a man's suiting, was all that rewarded his scrutiny as someone went swiftly past his point of vantage, walking with those identical rapid but seemingly unhurried steps which he had heard before. Conway placed his ear against the keyhole. Without a reasonable doubt, the footsteps were emphatically descending a carpeted stair, somewhere to the right . . . *bump, bump, bump, bump* . . .

Silently, the baronet opened his door and, still crouching, peeped along a wide upper hall, brightly lit but curtained heavily at both ends. He looked to his right, towards a curved balustrade descending, apparently, into darkness, for the hall lighting made an oblique shadow against the wall beyond the stairhead. He stood upright, slipped the key back into the lock and turned it, and with a silent prayer raced soft-footed for the end of the hallway, then pressed himself closely against the wall above the well and endeavoured to insinuate his head round the corner in order to glimpse, without betraying his presence, the way he intended going—down those stairs.

He glimpsed nothing. He received a hard blow just between the eyes, and swayed forward into profound unconsciousness.

.

Arnold, laid up snugly under his hedge, watched the frozen flood of the moonlight taking majestic possession of the garden.

His instructions were perfectly clear in his mind. He was to await Conway's signal, the quick double-flash of an electric torch, coming from the tall pile of the house beyond the lawn. At that signal he was to advance boldly to the front door of Acorns. Meanwhile, he was to note and remember all that went on outside the house. For a long time nothing went on. Then there was the rich purr of an expensive motor, somewhere down the long drive which ran through a park-like expanse of oak-dotted meadowland to the distant lodge-gates, near to the tiny local railway-station. Thereafter, things went on at a bewildering pace, with puzzling and sinister freakishness, and to the accompaniment of hellish uproar. . . .

The dogs began the music. They bayed, they barked, they howled as the car came steadily onward. Arnold heard the cries of their guardian raised ineffectually against the clamour, and the sharp slamming of car doors. A light sprang up briefly on the still façade of the house, and a loud warning shout rang out, in a man's strong, strongly moved voice. More hound-music, muffled and blasphemous roars from the caretaker. And, altogether unaccountably, the solemn, harsh *crack-crack* of shots from a big-bored revolver and the scurry of hurrying feet over the gravel of the drive leading to the front door, now gaping wide enough to show a slit of light casting a long steady illumination over the lawns and flower-beds. Then the roar of an excited exhaust and the snarl of a powerful engine in its lowest gears furiously backing and turning. The gears hummed through their changes and the noise of the car receded rapidly, only to be followed by a succession of similar noises as another and smaller car did likewise.

Arnold lay as doggo as the dead. He believed in strictly obeying orders, especially when the breaking of them involved moving into the midst of the violent and possibly lethal activities of men seemingly gone mad. . . . The dogs were strangely quiet now, growling and whimpering. At this awe-inspiring moment, the slit of light marking the open front door of Acorns widened in defiance of the Defence Regulations, and these orders of the State were further violated by the white glow of an electric torch, which went out and on again. 'Well,' thought Arnold, rising and brushing leaves from his clothes, 'that's a funny way to make a signal. I expected something much snappier. In—out—in—out. And the brouhaha seems to be principally over, anyway.' He marched boldly forward to the front door. A dim figure, making

uncertain motions of its arms and legs, seemed to be trying to crawl down a flight of shallow stone steps, backwards—and seemed to be experiencing difficulty in doing so. An occasional sighing groan could be heard. Then a voice tintured with the rich accents of the west of Ireland clearly enunciated some very bad words. Arnold stopped, peering forward, his hands on his knees.

"Sir Brian?" he asked. "You all right?"

"Merciful Michael," muttered Sir Brian. "Ye ask me am I all right? How can I be all right? Does a man climb in this un-gainly fashion down a flight av steps he could, if all right, negotiate in a single gigantic bound, unless he's injured to the point av death? Answer me? Does he?"

"No, I suppose not," answered Arnold, placidly. "What's wrong with you, then?"

"I've been murderously attacked, an' savagely assaulted. Apart from that, I'm fine. Could ye, though, just to please me, stand still wan moment, while I focus the sight av ye—and do some little thing to stop the rotatin' an' revolvin' av these gardens an' grounds? Could ye just put your strong hand on the gardens, I say, an' still their everlastin' gyratin' an' spinnin'?"

"Sure," said Arnold. "Watch, now." He held up a hand. "Be still," he commanded.

"Ah, thankye," said Conway, weakly, and slumped in a heap at the bottom of the steps.

Slowly Arnold went up the steps and into the house, pulling the door shut behind him. He stood in a discreetly lighted hallway, panelled to the ceiling, running back into dusky shadows. A fitted carpet stretched before him, a soft, dark-brown expanse upon the rich pile of which his delicate footsteps as he advanced made darker impressions. There were doors to his right and left—great tall doors of deep-toned mahogany, elaborately lintelled. Soon he came upon an unlighted stairway curving upward into entire gloom.

"The bathroom!" he thought, and began a noiseless ascent. Surely there would be things in the bathroom, like sal volatile, or smelling-salts, or at least running water—things enabling you to make restorative efforts? He reached a landing. It was all utterly black, with the close blackness that comes from the careful shutting-out of every least crack of light, the meticulous, wartime blackness which had become by usage a familiar phenomenon. Where the devil was the bathroom? Dimly he remembered a

door at the far end of this spacious upper hall, and went silently onward.

Then he stopped, holding his breath. In his careful, inch-by-inch progress over the carpeted floor, making no noise himself that his ears could detect, he had heard an indrawn breath. Stock-still, he stood and listened. Very faintly he could hear someone breathing . . . not natural, easy breathing, but the lightest kind of panting sound, as if someone breathless with fear or effort was making, within a few yards of him, desperate endeavours to be as silent as he was. The thumping of his own heart, horribly loud, was soon sufficient to eclipse the faint sound. Fear—or effort? That was, to Arnold, the question. Was it a murderer, there so painfully close to him, or a fugitive?—was it a menace, or someone equally with himself in need of protection? He kept his place, but slowly and defensively lifted his arms in front of him in the darkness. His hands touched something.

"Oh!" said a faint, musical voice, in accents of final despair.

Arnold's hands came together, clasping a mane of soft hair; they fell—upon tweed-clad shoulders. A faint, frail essence of perfume touched his nostrils and his grip involuntarily tightened. His hands slid down and round the shoulders, protectingly.

"Ann," he whispered.

"Is it—is it—Arnold?" said Ann Cumber.

"Yes. Yes! What are you doing? What—how do you come to be here?"

A finger touched his murmuring lips.

"*Listen,*" she said.

Away from the house, still distant but rapidly approaching, the noise of car-engines thrummed upon their ears.

"Conway!" exclaimed Arnold. "He's lying in the doorway downstairs."

"Did you shut the door?" breathed Ann. He was still holding her in a deathless embrace, as if her soft, sturdy, pliant body was the one unalterable and sure physical fact in a world grown crazily undependable.

"Yes. How can we get to the front of the house, without being seen?" he asked.

She moved in his arms. He released his grasp and she slipped away from him. A moment later a switch clicked, and they looked at each other with a wild, happy surmise.

"I told you," he muttered, man-like, forgetting his need for action in his need for rebuke, "to keep away. You should have

kept away from all of them. Why on earth come here? It only looks suspicious. I told you—do nothing, say nothing."

"I know," she said, dropping a fringe of coppery-gold lashes over lambent blue eyes. She shook with sudden violence her glowing mane of hair, and looked at him steadily.

"Arnold, do you believe they—suspect us?"

"No," he said bluntly. "And we must keep it that way. Once they do——"

The approaching cars were now very near. The dogs were howling outside.

"This way!"

She flung open a door and vanished. Arnold followed. His feet sank into a very deep pile. He groped forward until he found her. In the warm dark, holding his shoulders briefly, she kissed him, once.

"The window's just here, behind me," she whispered. "You can open the curtains as long as we don't show a light."

He moved past her and felt for the curtains. Pulling them up from the floor, he slipped beneath them and pressed his face to the cold glass. Beyond the tall pane, a silver world shone up at the sky, but the moon's full light no longer fell on the front of the house, and Arnold felt confident he could not be seen from the garden. Several dark figures were hurrying up the curve of the drive towards the front door. Some of them were unmistakably Home Guards, appropriately capped and carrying sloped arms. Others seemed to be uniformed police and air-raid wardens. Arnold grinned, remembering the blaze of light when the gate-keeper had illumined the wicket-gate with bright overhead electrics, looking for Conway and himself. That would have been certain to bring air-raid wardens, sooner or later.

A silent watcher at his window, he observed the group of men huddle themselves below him in the moonlight, peering to look at something lying below the steps. There was a mutter of commands. Arnold saw Conway lifted, saw him, with a hand to his temples, seated on an overcoat laid over the stone steps, another overcoat thrown round his shoulders. Interrogations began, with stern and staccato utterances from one of the policemen, and with growingly lucid and emphatic remarks from Conway.

"You say you are Sir Brian Conway. Can you tell me what brought you here tonight?" demanded the policeman at last.

"No," said Conway, in a strong voice. "I can't. Not now. You must refer to Inspector Goodman and Detective-Inspector Thrust, over at Heavenridge. And don't make so much damned noise, please. I want to think."

"Oh, you want to think, eh? Well, I believe we can arrange for you to have just the sort of quiet and solitude that would do very well for thinking. Did you kill Mr. John Cumber?"

There was a considerable pause.

"How did *you* know he was dead?" asked Conway in a new, careful voice.

"Never mind that, if you please. What's more interesting is how did *you* know?"

"I guessed," said Conway, and laughed musically. He took out a packet of cigarettes, lit one, and, drawing the overcoat more closely around him, looked up at the stern faces bent upon him. "Go on, copper. Ask me some more. But be very careful. Be damn' careful. You think you're interrogating a murderer, I suppose. Well, you couldn't be wrong. But go on."

"Look here!" exclaimed the policeman, his voice rising as Conway's deliberate baiting produced the desired effect. "Look here! There are two dead men in the grounds of this house. We came here after—after——"

"Acting on information received, I suppose?"

"If you like—if you like. Lights blazing to high heaven, shots being fired, several cars up here—a house reported to us by the tenant as left empty until further notice. Only an outside caretaker on the place. Then—all this commotion. I've tried to be patient with you—to question you in a reasonable manner."

"Reasonable?" queried that deceptively lazy drawl with which Ireland always puts on a front of superior diffidence when nearest to a Celtic explosion of temperament or of temper. "How, reasonable? Cat-and-mouse tactics, copper—the oldest gag in the trade. Why, if you were going to be reasonable, didn't you just say, 'Look here, sir, there's a couple of stiffs lying a few yards away. Do you know anything about 'em?' I'll tell you why you didn't. Because you hoped to trap me. Now I'll tell you something else. I won't answer another single question. You try and make me. I've nothing to say. Go away!"

"By heaven, I've had enough of this. You'll come along with me at once, to the station. Up you get!"

"Where's your warrant? Or what's the charge?"

Another pause ensued.

"The charge is being on enclosed property, suspicion of loitering with intent."

"Dear me! Not murder, then? And no warning?"

The policeman did not deign to answer. He moved away, a bulky shape in the moonlight, making an exasperated gesture to his men. These moved towards Conway, uncertainly. The A.R.P. men, two of them, stood discreetly aside. The Home Guards began to shuffle down the drive. Conway rose, still cloaked in the overcoat. With a quick wriggle, he had slipped out of it and draped it across the head and shoulders of the nearer constable. The other, startled, found himself pinioned from behind, his front buttons ripped open and the unaccommodating folds of his rigid serge tunic pulled backward to his elbows. He looked like a clipped ostrich. His superior officer plunged at Conway with a grunting cry, only to find himself flying, overbacks, into the welcoming embrace of the rose-bushes, full of detaining thorns. Arnold glimpsed Conway, very briefly, for an instant, legging it across the lawn; then the baronet seemed to vanish.

The three struggling officers, blasphemous and uproarious, were all on his track very soon. The A.R.P. men remained close together, inanimate, then walked off to their car. The Home Guards accelerated their departure from the scene—presumably because it held no promise of action against their nation's embattled enemies, and they disliked the local police, anyway. Arnold watched silently. The three officers accompanied their hunt with a great din of shouting, breaking branches, and—for a brief, delightful interlude—tinkling glass, when one of them apparently tried to run at the full speed of a heavily built man over what sounded like a quarter-acre of cucumber glass. A distant and disconsolate rumble of voices in disappointed conclave far down the garden seemed to indicate a bootless search. For nearly a quarter of an hour Arnold watched, and at the end of that time heard, with relief, the last of the cars, which had been standing with dimmed headlights at the end of the drive, purr away into the night with a declining cadence. Only then did he step back into the big room and roll the curtains musically home on their runners, sixteen feet above the heavily carpeted floor. The light clicked on as he did so, dazzling him with the fullness of its radiance.

Ann Cumber stood watching him, surrounded by the sheeted shapes of furniture.

"Well," she said, smiling. "That *was* a do! I suppose they didn't succeed in arresting Sir Brian?"

"I don't think so. It wouldn't be easy, if only they knew. There'll be rare ructions over this night's work. Now, Ann. Tell me what you were doing here, will you? I gather"—his dark glance glowed for a moment—"that you think I—I—have some sort of a right to ask? In spite of being just your uncle's employee?"

"Secretary of Ranaldshaws, Arnold. Don't be an inverted snob. And after all, now that my uncle is—now that we don't have to—oh, Arnold—we can be married, do *anything*, not have to scheme, and pretend, and—— I came here in the back of that fiend Fosdyke's car. In the rumble-seat. I hid. He drove here with Georgette. Don't be mad. I just felt I had to know, about those two. Not because of Georgette, either, Arnold. But because of James de Forrest Fosdyke, the gentlemanly dastard."

"Why, for Heaven's sake? What did his goings-on matter to you?"

"Arnold, he was pursuing me."

"He—*what*?"

"Yes. Very fascinating, for fifty, the Fosdyke. Of course he was wasting his time—don't look like a furious tenor, Arnold, my sweet. You never can seem to imagine how difficult everything has been for me. I mean, everybody assuming I'm heart-whole, fancy-free, and somewhat lacking. Oh, dear, the heavy hints! The roguish winks! The nods and becks and wreathed smiles. *Everybody*—except you. And then, when we came to Gallop Mile, and the dark gentleman rolled his great eyes upon my dainty person, rasping that black moustache of his like a damn' nutmeg-grater—it was awkward! You simply can't imagine."

"I can imagine anything," said Arnold firmly. He put on his spectacles after wiping them carefully with a silk handkerchief, and touched them gently on the bridge of his nose, staring at his beloved.

"Stick to the point," he went on. "What did those two come here for? Did they—were they *alone*?"

"Alone?" Her blue eyes, dark under the bright unshaded lights, widened, and her face looked, suddenly, like a tragic white mask. "*Alone*?" she repeated in a whisper. Arnold continued to regard her intently through his spectacles. He lifted his hands, then let them fall to his sides again.

"He's dead, Ann," he said quietly.

The girl did not stir a voluntary muscle for the next quarter of a minute. Her eyes filled; she sighed a long, low sigh.

"I think I knew. All along, I knew. Poor John. Why, Arnold—oh, why? What can it mean? Uncle *had* to die, hadn't he? Hadn't he? But not my brother?"

She seemed to ponder.

"He was a good guy, in some ways. A—a fiend in others," she said. "He was an—an admirable bookmaker, I suppose. And a good husband, as far as it went. I mean, it can't be helped if Georgette, who was given just everything a woman is expected to want, like furs, and jewels, and things, just couldn't stand any longer his peculiar sort of *uninterest*. In her, and her doings. I like Georgette. I can see her point of view. She craved something more than the oysters and champagne. Passion, I suppose. He gave her comfort, and she craved for ecstasy. But that's not a shortcoming which would make anyone want to murder him, is it?"

There was a tremendous crash of knocking on the front door of the house. Both of them jumped, visibly. Ann sprang to the door, her hand reaching for the switch.

"Never mind!" exclaimed Arnold, through and under the thunder of noise. "Out, and down the back stairs. Leave all the lights. We're blacked-out, and if there's a leak anywhere, they'll have seen it by now. Hurry!"

They raced along the upper landing, breathless, silent, Ann leading. She pushed a baize door at the far end and they went down a double flight of stairs, switching on lights as they proceeded. Across a square hall, through a big kitchen, and then through another door into a long, windowed passage smelling of onions, hay, soap and leather. They flitted along in alternate moonlight and shade, until they reached, at the very end, a flight of stone steps descending to a great oaken door. They were very near the kennels, and the noise of the dogs, roused to a frenzy by the assault on the front of the house, effectively shrouded the squeaking of a huge key in the rusty lock.

"Lock it behind you," Ann panted; Arnold turned, fumbling with the unwieldy piece of iron. One behind the other they glided past the wire-meshed exercise yard in front of the dogs' houses; in another three seconds they were crouched in the shelter of the tall, encircling hedge of evergreens and mercifully shadowed by the house from the light of the low-hung moon.

"However did Sir Brian get through this hedge?" whispered

Ann. "It's impassable, practically. Arnold—how are *we* going to get through?"

Arnold pushed his face out of the feather-soft fronds, staring towards the main gate, a modest fifty yards away, the latter half of that distance being bathed in opalescent light. The high, white, boarded gates surmounted by fearful spikes stood invitingly open, and beyond them, he knew, lay the open park and the way to freedom.

"Could we crawl, close to the wire, *through* the trees?"

Ann scuffled about.

"We can, Arnold! Are the gates open?"

"Yes. Let me go first. Keep your nose away from my boot-heels . . ."

On hands and knees they proceeded at a fair pace through the very centre of the hedge, along a natural corridor formed by the close-meshed wire on one side and the straight sinewy columns of the tree-trunks, unleaved for some two feet from the needle-strewn ground, upon the other. All this time the house remained uncannily quiet, but the restive dogs kept up a muttered barrage of howls, barking, throaty growls, and occasional plaintive whining. They gained the gateway. Arnold prospected the empty drive, the gardens standing cold and empty, the silent house.

"Nippy does it," he said, and bolted round the open gate, ducked under a rail fence, and lay on cool grass, staring out over an undulating square mile of tree-dotted meadow. A low whistle brought Ann scuttling to his side.

"We shall be awfully visible," she said. He nodded, sighed, and stood up. She scrambled to her feet. At a steady jog-trot they moved over the shining sward, towards a group of low huts shaded by young oaks. They found a dry stall in one of the untenanted stables, sweet with hay, and there, like the babes in the wood, they covered themselves, huddled snugly together for greater warmth, and after a little time fell into broken slumber. . . .

It was an early morning of clear gold when they rose, indifferently refreshed, and regarded each other with wry faces.

"I've got to move my limbs. I've got to walk. Let's walk, Arnold," said Ann.

It was much too early for trains when they passed the small railway-station standing untenanted and washed in glorious light. They plodded on by footpath ways for more than an hour, without exchanging a word—a lost-looking, unkempt, dirty and

dispirited couple, meeting no one but the blackbird on the thorn, a knowing fox who watched them steadily with one dainty paw uplifted before vanishing like a puff of ruddy smoke, and some sheep who seemed to be chewing gum and meditating the supreme folly of humankind.

The smell of baking bread, that most maddening of scents on the air of a new day, brought Ann to a full stop. They were in a five-acre field bright with buttercups, and friendly red roofs and a grey spire seemed to welcome them behind a line of elm trees.

"Oh, come on, then," said Arnold, feeling his unshaven chin with unwashed fingers.

"I just wonder what on earth we're running away from, anyway," said the girl. "Who's after us? Who's even thinking about us? Poor little us! Eh? Who in all Kent, at this moment, cares one small damn where we are, who we are, what we are?"

"Who was that, banging at the front door, d'you suppose? He sounded mighty interested, to me."

"It might have been Sir Brian. P'raps he never left the grounds after all, but just lay doggo in the hedge. High up. Where those fool cops would never think of looking. They always peer at the ground, don't they, for footprints?"

Arnold meditated a space. They climbed a moss-grown stile, traversed a coppice, opened a gate, and strode along a well-metalled highway towards houses, shops, a bus-stop sign, two pot-bellied inns, a church on a triangular little hill of emerald grass—and a bright red telephone kiosk.

"It might have been Sir Brian," admitted Arnold. "But I didn't feel like taking chances. I'm not at all brave, in case you don't know. I've been subjected to so much attempted battery recently, I've got morbidly sensitive about chaps who go banging hell out of front doors in the middle of the night, twenty minutes or so after two dead men have been found at the lodge gates. *Two* dead men, Ann. And one of them your brother, a good guy to me, if ever I knew one. The other was that gatekeeper bloke. They—they just shot him, you know. While we were in the house. And then drove away."

"Who did?" said Ann, white to the lips. "Georgette and—Fosdyke?"

Arnold shrugged hopeless shoulders. They heard a voice lifted in blithe song, the words and music being of that kind which is associated in the popular mind with the State of Wyoming, so fortuitously rhyming with roaming, gloaming and homing, and

so uselessly with foaming. A collarless man with plenteous curly hair strode out of an open doorway into the road and rattled vigorously the door of a very small, very battered baby saloon. The odour of his pleasant trade was hot on the morning. On seeing them, the song died on his lips. He gasped.

"Good morning!" said Arnold very cheerfully, and smiling a smile which, had he known it, invested him, for the other, with all the cold horror which would be induced by the appearance of an affable corpse. "Would you care to sell us a little bread? A cup of tea, too, would be welcome, if you take any yourself about this time of day. And afterwards, we wondered would you very much mind giving us a lift as you go on your round? We want to get to Heavenridge. When do the buses run?"

"Fridays," said the man, lifting a hand to pull distractedly at his mop of curls.

"Good lor'!" exclaimed Ann. "And this is only Tuesday. Or is it Wednesday? Anyhow—a long time to wait. Do be a dear, and give us a lift, Mr. Baker. If you only knew what we've been through!"

The accent of that inordinately expensive and exclusive academy which had taught Ann Cumber, too well, the futility of education, worked like a charm on the baker. Perhaps also her general shape, her hair, her large and luminous eyes . . . who can say? A baker is only a kind of man.

"I can run yer up the road a bit, miss, an' give yer a nice cupper tea, slice o' new bread or two, if yer like," he said, carefully not looking at the apparition of Arnold.

"Or two," said Ann. "New from the very oven. Oh, bless you, bless you!"

He grinned, and turned into his doorway.

"Ought we to telephone?" said Arnold, irresolutely looking across the road towards the kiosk.

"No," said that mercurial young woman, who seemed to be able to flit from a state of tragic misery to one of flippant happiness, and back, as easily as she breathed. "Leave this baker to me, Arnold. I don't think he fancies you very much. It's not surprising, really——"

The baker came out, a big basket on one arm, a cup of tea in each hand.

"We've had a dreadful accident," said Ann, sipping scalding tea ceremoniously, and fixing a big-eyed gaze on the unsettled tradesman. "This is my—er—my bailiff. We got tossed into a

hedge. Pony bolted. Don't know how he got away from the trap. We've had to walk simply *miles*."

She tore off lumps of warm bread, and engulfed them with a vivid display of strong white teeth. Arnold saw that the baker was gulping with emotion.

"Tell you as we go," said Ann, with her mouth full. "Hawkins, you can ride in the back with the basket. Shall we start?"

"Yes'm," said Arnold and the baker, like a comic duet.

They started, and Ann shamelessly cuddled herself against the baker's shoulder, which quivered as that of a strong man moved. They bowled along a green and winding lane at an asthmatic twenty-five miles an hour on a course made somewhat spasmodically erratic by the driver's frequent attempts to look down, with his mouth open, into the piquant oval face turned up to him with adoring trustfulness.

"I *know*," burbled the young woman, "that you'll just drive us straight on to Heavenridge. I just *know*. Won't you?"

Arnold glared out of the tiny windows as the baker pondered his own primitive theory of rewards and fairies. He braked with a violent swerve and brought the trembling vehicle to rest by a little white gate in a deep hawthorn hedge, on the wrong side of the road. Arnold struggled with the vast basket. The baker got out on the off-side, close to the white gate, and accepted the basket without looking at Arnold. His expression was of a sort of goggling amiability, a doggy coquettishness.

"I might," he remarked archly, and opened the gate, the basket on his arm. His disgusted rear-seat passenger stared out of the near-side window. He sat bolt upright with such unpremeditated violence that he was nearly stunned by the low metal roof of the car. A man was looking with extraordinary intentness, through field-glasses, from an upper window of a modern red-and-white house standing back from the near-side of the road, on slightly rising ground from which the hedges had been cut back; he was, quite obviously, and openly, focussing his earnest attention on the battered little saloon, and trying very hard to distinguish its occupants. Arnold's sharp exclamation as he struck his head on the roof made Ann turn round; the glimpse she got of his set stare swivelled her back again, following the direction of that fixed and frightened gaze.

"Crikey!" she said.

Then the man at the window vanished into the shadowy interior of the upper room. Arnold lay where he had dropped, on

the small of his back, still with his eyes fastened on the blank, sun-glittering open window with its white muslin curtains faintly stirring in the morning breeze. They both heard, with jumping pulses, the hoarse roar of a big car engine vibrating in shrill gusts as someone, behind the red-and-white house, warmed it up with fierce blasts of throttle on a half-choked carburettor. And Ann fumbled in the outside breast pocket of her bedraggled tweed jacket, pulled out a little leather note-case, extracted five new one-pound notes, and dropped them out of the open off-side window of the car, sliding herself into the worn and sunken driving-seat.

"Love or money," she said, "I expect it's all the same, to that conquest of mine. Let's get the hell out of this. . . ."

She touched the starter, and the baby saloon rocketed forward with a hysterical lurch, swerving like a bee-stung horse. They were still in bottom gear when they ground past the gates of the red-and-white house, down towards which a big, shiny American saloon was ominously rolling; Ann changed up with a noise like hundreds of dental drills attacking all one's teeth on a wide, united front.

"Can—you—drive?" gasped Arnold from the floorboards, to which their tempestuous departure had consigned him.

"Not properly, yet. I hope to be quite accomplished at it before the morning's out. Is he following? This kind of hunted-fugitive existence does the funniest things to my stomach. I suppose he *is* after us—you?"

"Looks very like it," moaned Arnold, watching from the near window the glistening roof of the American car racing parallel with the hedge-tops, two bends away across the smiling fields. "He's bound to catch us."

"Let him do it. Let him try his damn' tricks. We're two to one. I'll ditch this rattle-box as soon as he starts crowding us, and we'll both go for him. Did you see his ugly mug?"

"Couldn't—owing to the field-glasses. He's not gaining much, actually. He can't seem to go terribly fast round these bends."

It might have been this faintly reassuring speech which misled the untutored girl to a belief that the tiny saloon could corner at almost a right-angle off a fifty-yard stretch of straight, at a speed of nearly forty trembling miles an hour (on the clock.) She did not lift her right foot an inch. Just where the road swung sharply to the right it was bordered by a dense thicket of close-leaved, trimmed elderberry. The small car went clean through this

without the slightest motion sideways in response to the helm. Clean through, and straight on. . . . It buried itself, from bonnet to rear bumpers, in the receptive, absorbing mass of a last-year's haystack. The hay closed over it with scarcely a ripple—as, afterwards, when they came to inspect the scene of their startling exploit, they found the elderberry bushes had done also—presenting to the intent gaze of their pursuer, as he swept down the straight only ten seconds after they had so dramatically left it, no indication whatever that the little car had done anything else but take the sharp right-hand bend. They heard, dimly, the *whirr* of his passage, the muffled protest of his swollen tyres on the corner. The rest was an awed silence, for the inability of their rear wheels to achieve any tractive effort against the resistance of all that hay had brought the chattering engine spluttering into inaction. And only then did Ann think to lift her right foot from the accelerator pedal. . . .

"How are we going to get out? I'm almost disembowelled. I don't think I shall ever bear you young, after all," said Ann in faint tones. Arnold raised a bloodstained face from behind the front seat. He had wisely tucked himself into a ball, on the floor, the instant he had realized the nature of the bend ahead of them, but his face had been ground painfully into the coarse fabric of the seat.

"We'll manage, somehow," he said, with a cheerfulness sprung from pure gratitude and relief at deadly peril safely past.

There was a scampering, shuffling sound behind their small prison.

"Rats!" screamed Ann, struggling to get her feet up on the seat.

"It's someone trying to get us out," said Arnold. Undoubtedly the darkness was momentarily clearing. A face peered in at them through the rear window.

"Well, well, well," said the secretary of Ranaldshaws Limited. "If it isn't Sir Brian Conway! *Now* we're all right."

He had never been wronger.

CHAPTER V

"Charity and Mercy. Not unholy names, I hope?"

—MR. PECKSNIFF.

"SEX," said Sir Brian Dinsmore Conway, "rears its adorable head, and crows, triumphantly."

"Meaning?" demanded Ann Cumber, tenderly dabbing at her lover's cruelly but superficially outraged face. In spite of accumulated dirt, dishevelment, and a total lack of all those proper aids to *ersatz* loveliness without which women feel almost naked—the grooming, the burnishing and pigmentation of their surfaces, the over-all stylizing—she contrived to look alluring, and boyish, and idiotically young, and somehow matronly. Such is true beauty. If you haven't got it, you haven't. Sorry. . . .

"Meaning that I am noticing for the first time some of the human aspects of the mysteries among which we move. They've been hidden, owing to my concentration on facts. What are called facts, I suppose I ought to say. You know—what policemen call facts. Such as arsenic, letters, cheques, motor-cars driven without due care and attention, hand-grenades cast with intent. That sort of thing. And all the time, love blooms amongst us, an opulent flower. You and young Arnold here—with your guilty secret. The Fosdyke and his Georgette. I suppose you realize you're all officially suspect?"

Ann's gentle fingers slowed at their task, but did not tremble. Nor did her voice convey any hint of a betraying tremor.

"Are we?" she remarked. "What are you trying to do, frighten me? Because I don't think you can. Look: my brother's body was brought to that house last night—dead or alive. Which? And who brought it? Certainly Georgette and the dark charmer were there—but so were other people—including you, for instance. And who was the chap with the field-glasses, who chased us into this haystack? He lives only a couple of miles down the road. Aren't these the sort of questions you should be getting the answers to? After seeing us safely home, of course," she added, hastily.

Arnold giggled feebly, resting his weary back against the side of the stack, and half-closing his eyes against the bright, enquiring

sunshine. Conway, darkly unshaven, very ragged, and with straws in his hair, lay on his back, relaxed, breathing in through strongly arched nostrils.

"Arnold was there, too," he murmured. "We were all in it. A typical Conway fiasco. It was I who frightened you, of course. When I realized the cops had gone, I felt sure that Arnold, who was with me on the doorstep just before I passed out for the second time, just must be inside the house. I little suspected that his *inamorata* was also among those present. I give you full marks for that getaway. Nary a hint did I have of you, the pair of you, or I'd have given you a big hello. The coast, as they say, was clear. Smugglers' old saw. Afterwards, I tramped through the night, not exactly wishing to pinch anybody's car, but looking for a car to pinch and with a pretty good idea of where to drive it to, having pinched it. We're about a mile from the Heaven-ridge road here. When I saw the haystack, I just curled up and slept."

Arnold held up a hand.

"He's coming back," he said. "Listen."

Conway rolled over on his stomach and wriggled off towards the elderberry thicket.

"I could bear to set eyes on this gent with the field-glasses," he grunted, parting the willowy stems and peering out upon the road. To his left it ran straight, for a hundred and fifty yards, to another corner; immediately before him it ran into the eye of the sun towards the village where Arnold and Ann had met their baker. A large open car was coming towards the sharp corner from that direction, slowing for the turn; another car, a big American saloon, swung into view on the left-hand stretch and moved up rapidly. Conway's face was only an inch from the ground. He felt reasonably sure that the occupants of the nearer car, even with the sun directly behind them, would not see him; the touring car uttered a perfunctory *toot* and slowed almost to a standstill, swinging over to the driver's right. At that moment, the other car heaved up to the corner with a sudden surge of engine-noise as it changed gear. The two machines came to a stop. Neither could pass the other. Conway heard his companions creep up behind him; they all lay flat in the straw and strove to see into the roadway.

Out of the off-side front window of the open American saloon peered a plump, pallid, expressionless face fitted with horn-rimmed spectacles; its very thin, very wide lips were motionless;

it was crowned by a thick thatch of stubbornly upstanding grey hair. The other car was full of uniformed policemen; full to bursting; they sat in solid rows of dark blue and silver, upright in their places and almost all of the same height, all their faces shadowed at an identical angle by the sharply projecting peaks of their caps; there were three in the front seats, two behind them, and four in the rear seats.

"Crikey!" murmured Conway, his voice drowned in the steady purr of two engines, "a pride of police! A covert of cops! Whoever saw the like of this? Arnold! I dislike your fat friend, there. What! A smooth rogue. See his slits of eyes. Observe his poker-pan. Inhuman, calm, villain . . . peace ho! Mark the chief bluebottle. He begins to speak."

"Why, Mr. Mortenson," said the inspector of constabulary, descending from one car and approaching the other, erect, dignified, neatly moustached, and holding symbolic white gloves. "you're out early this morning, sir. Hope I'm not detaining you? Have you been out along the Heavenridge road, sir?"

The grey head nodded.

"Well, did you happen to see anything of a small Morris saloon—belongs to Jim Evatt, the baker in the village? We've reason to believe it's been stolen by a couple we're very anxious to lay our hands on, sir. Man and a girl who seem, on the face of it, to have been concerned in a rather nasty piece of business over to Limpsland, last night. Local police have been out nearly all night. We only heard this morning."

"The baker's van?" said a thin voice from the inert, pale face in which the thin lips seemed scarcely to move. "Why, I believe it was in front of me as I came this way a quarter of an hour back. Funny thing, Inspector, but—it was only just in front of me when it turned into this stretch of straight, leading up to the corner, here—the way you came. Yet it had *gone* when I reached the corner."

The inspector measured distances with his eye, turning his head with flashings of light from the shiny peak of his cap. Mr. Mortenson stared, out of narrowed, intent eyes, at the grass-verge below the elderberry thicket. Conway, Ann and Arnold began to move back like dusty snakes, away from the thicket, towards the haystack.

"Out, men! Scatter!" cried the inspector's voice on a deep and baying note of excitement, the excitement of the find, the expectation of the view.

At the back of the haystack, Conway put one firm, untroubled hand on each of two trembly elbows.

"Follow Uncle," he whispered, his bright eyes dancing in his dark face. "We mustn't run. We must be stalky. They're only *perlice*. *Bet you a tenner they all get out of the car!*"

In the contagion of his wild confidence they found comfort and strength. Conway was padding on all fours in the very lee of the hedge-corner, a foot deep in rank, cool grass and cow-parsley. Ann followed, presenting to Arnold a rear elevation at once disturbingly comely and pathetically unkempt. They burrowed like conies, but with gentle sideways snugglings, into the thorny heart of the hawthorns, flat to the earth, a few feet away from the halted police-car, and there they waited with their faces close-pressed to the sacred soil of their country. The police were tramping up the road and down the road. At least one of them was aloft on a telegraph pole, booming out negative news to his colleagues, and another was high in a tree across the way. There were three of them, Conway judged, breaking through the elderberry thicket . . . that left four in the road. He longed, he burned, to know just where they were. A distant shout, answering a call from the tree-top, gave him the location of one of these. Another shout, even more distant, and from the opposite direction, identified another. But coppers instinctively work in pairs, don't they? Better wait. Better wait. . . .

Loud cries announced the discovery of Jim Evatt the baker's saloon, embedded still in the haystack. The inspector made a blunder. He rallied his forces, and collected them like hounds at a bury, to tear and pull. When Conway heard the American saloon begin to back and turn and then to move cautiously round the corner to get past the police-car (leaving that high-powered machine a clear route forward to Heavenridge) he urgently whispered his companions and they broke cover, belly to earth, at the cost of two great flaps hanging from the gentlemen's trouser-legs, and much of Ann's skirt of natty tweed.

"Oh, come *on!*" she exclaimed to Arnold, scrambling leggily over the side of the tourer, disdaining doors and careless for the moment of mere nakedness. "You've seen statues, I expect."

Arnold, goggling, heaved himself atop of her. The engine was started very gently . . . the other car had disappeared . . . no policeman even looked over a hedge at them as they rolled round the corner. Once round, they confronted a single plodding constable approaching the bend with downcast head and leisurely

step; he moved aside instinctively, and looked up, much too late. The roar of their exhaust cut off his anguished outcry.

"You might as well know now as later," said Ann to Arnold, folding her abbreviated jacket snugly about her shapely hips and stretching her unstockinged legs before her so that her feet rested on the occasional seat, "I wear *wool*. Comfort before speed."

"You wear remarkably little of it," said Arnold, gazing firmly ahead over Conway's hunched shoulder. They slowed for the Heavenridge road, turned, flashed away again. Houses, barns, trees, sloping fields, a distant spire, spun about them in golden light. A clump of firs broke the skyline.

"Mr. Smallfield's place," cried Arnold. "Up there on the hill. We're nearly there. Gables is about a mile down the road. There's Gallop Mile . . ."

A green-and-black car, approaching them, signalled a turn to its near side; it needed the full width of road to get into a pair of brick-pillared gates; Conway slowed almost to a stop. The other car stopped, and from beside its driver a pugnacious face stared at them, close-pressed to the windscreen.

"Why, if it ain't Thrust, in person!" shouted Conway, and drew up the car at the side of the road.

Detective-Inspector Thrust came round the front of his halted motor-car and advanced upon them with quickly working legs and forward-hunched shoulders like a bulldog straining on a strong leash. He came right up, and his honest eyes were puckered in a ludicrous grimace combining the expression of relief, fury, and a fundamental doubt of the reality of observed phenomena. When his gaze fell on Ann's seductive semi-nudity he went a fullish purple about the neck and forehead and strove with his organs of speech, unavailingly.

"Nice goings-on," he got out at last. "Sir Brian, I must have a word with you in private. Have you got this young woman under arrest?"

Arnold sat very still, white and calm, a thin hand pressed gently over Ann's crumpled little fists. Conway moved languidly in the driving-seat, as if settling himself more comfortably.

"No," he said. "Why?"

"We've got a case. The Limpsland police have been telephoning me."

"Congratulations. You must tell us about it, sometime."

Thrust's underlip came forward; he champed for several

seconds; his eyes never left Conway's. Then he seemed to droop, inside his clothes.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "I ought not to get at cross-purposes, with you of all men. I *think* I've got a case. Maybe it's only suspicion."

"The thing is, everything is only suspicion, so far, Thrust. And that's very suspicious itself, you see. Someone is spreading suspicion, all the time. No doubt a portion of it is aimed this way. It darkens counsel, Thrust. That's what it does. Be a good policeman, and stick to your pals as well. We'll investigate the case against Miss Cumber, all right. But fling away suspicion! By that sin——"

He turned round and grinned at Arnold.

"I could eat again," he said. "And all of us are as unkempt as cats on the garden wall. Where would you be going, this fine morning, Thrust?"

"I'm going up to see Mr. Sam Smallfield at his house, here."

"Very interesting. I'd like to come, too. And I think Mr. Winterset should be in on it. And, finally, I am not disposed to allow either him or his fiancée out of my sight, yet awhile. The number of my wards, you see, Thrust," he went on, feeling for his pipe, "grows daily. Soon, I'll be acting as bodyguard to half your suspects. Which has at least the advantage for you of giving you a pretty good idea of the chances of being right, spotting the murderer out of the other half. Because I can't see myself being anxious to keep company with any of the gang at present engaged in practically unlimited slaughter around these parts. They don't seem to be respecters of my person, particularly. Nor even of yours, I might add. Where's my damn' tobacco?"

"Here," said Ann, retrieving a tattered leather pouch from the floor of the car.

"I thank you. Now, here's what I suggest, Thrust. Put off your interview with Mr. Smallfield until we're all fed, watered and made decent. Say an hour. We can do all that's necessary up at Gallop Mile, and keep together. Agreed?"

Thrust looked at the barrister long and meditatively, his lips seeming to form soundlessly the single word "gang"; he nodded briefly, and returned to his car. Conway moved his gear-lever to and fro preparatory to pressing the starter, a lighted pipe jutting impressively from his jaw. A great gong smote the summer air with resonance. He glanced behind him.

"The pride! Or covert!" he exclaimed.

Thrust was seated beside his driver, staring at a third approaching police-car.

"It's a bevy of bobbies, Thrust!" Conway called. "A clangour of cops. We have met. Don't bother to introduce us. We didn't get on well."

He waited until the new arrivals had slurred on screaming tyres to a dramatic stop between the two cars, and had debouched upon the road in a flurry of dark-blue trouserings, then slipped his clutch and swept forward; Ann, leaning over the front seat, her haunches higher than her head, and regardless of the startling exposure of her person, tugged merrily at the cord of the gong, and to its sonorous accompaniment they departed, leaving Detective-Inspector Thrust to cope with his colleagues along lines which have become wearily familiar to representatives of Scotland Yard in their dealings with county police. It's part of the job. They are paid for it. But—expostulations, thinly veiled rudeness, unwilling giving-way, endless points of precedence and petty routine—how many of us can work really well, however much we are paid, under such handicaps as these? Not for the first time Thrust wondered if collaboration with Conway was worth the mental trauma it added to his cases. (And be it said he had eventually to concede, not for the first time, and with appropriate Cockney blasphemy and generosity, that indeed, it was.) . . .

Ann Cumber smoothed down, from shoulder to hip-bones, the clinging white silk of a freshly laundered tennis frock, lifted a hand to touch her sideways-swept coppery mane just where it curved over one ear, and leaned forward to make big eyes at herself in the mirror.

"Gool!" she said. "You *lovely*, you!"

Over the reflection of her own shoulder she saw her room door open. There was a still glitter of radiance off the wide meadows of Gallop Mile, beyond a big window on the landing, and standing silhouetted in the doorway, a dark, still figure . . . "with a shape".

"Georgette! Come in, my pet," said Ann at once.

Mrs. Cumber came in, swinging-to the door behind her. Dark women! Georgette, half a head taller than her sister-in-law, moved with a long stride, holding herself lightly and upright, bearing her inches with full-breasted, narrow-waisted regality; her deep eyes gazed at you as if unwilling to let you go; she had a

rich mouth, delicate wrists and ankles, hair an ebony cloud quite unlike the Irish blue-black of Conway's head; she had a sun-brown skin with real roses glowing behind the tan and a surface like peach-bloom.

Ann watched her in the glass, smiling back at her.

"What a *night!*" said Georgette.

"I'll say."

"You were—there?"

"Behind the arras."

"How did you get?"

"In the rumble-seat."

"You heard—everything?"

"All I needed."

"Do you blame me?"

"Course not."

"Do you blame him?"

"No. The nature of the beast."

"You think he's a beast?"

"Georgette—you *know* he's a big, black, attractive beast. Uninhibited as a damn' horse. Crazy like a tom-cat. Course he's a beast."

"You don't dislike him?"

"How could I? He's himself. No girl can say, least of all an attractive piece—such," she glanced, smiling, at her mirror, "as I may fairly claim little orphan Annie is—that she doesn't *know* J.F.F. in all his masculine virulence, five minutes after he's rolled an eye over her. This is the nature of the Fosdyke. In the last thirty-five years or so, my sweet, many's the Kentish lass who's had reason to rue, etc. Or so they say."

"Oh, they say! And he doesn't look fifty. And I don't suppose he was even here when he was fifteen."

"You can't deny he was somewhere. And where he was, the lasses rued."

"He's generous. He's kind. *Really* kind."

"You bet he is. If he wasn't, he'd be behind strong stone walls. Oh, Georgette—I'm sorry. I know how—fond you are of him. And I do see your point. I've never criticized you, about John. I knew what a cold fiend John could be to everybody else except me. I know all about his insane jealousy. I know you were faithful to him as long as your marriage was—well, a marriage."

"Ann, you pet! But—*phew!* *What* a night! And this house full of your detective friends. One comes on them at corners."

Georgette Cumber sank into a chair, curling her bare brown legs upon the cushions. She looked at Ann, seated on a high chair in front of the dressing-table, and busying herself with something in a pot, a coppery curtain of hair hiding her face.

"And then," said Georgette, "that perfectly devastating young man from Berkeley Square. Dark. So intense you can feel his aura through a wall. No doubt he's here to get evidence, too. It's perfectly frightful. The way he puts on those spectacles, and just touches them with one finger, then looks at you."

"He is attractive, isn't he? We're—er—going to get married, so lay off."

"*What!* Oh, Ann, you serpent! Talk about protective mimicry. I'll never trust a redhead again. However long has all this been going on? I used to wonder why you were everlasting calling on Uncle Charles at Berkeley Square."

"A girl has her feelings."

"Yes, indeed. I—oo! What's that?"

Something went *woomp-woomp-woomp*, outside.

"Guns. Long way off. Tell me, Georgette. You—you—you didn't have John, with you, last night?"

The dark girl sat motionless.

"No," she whispered, at last. "No—you can't think—Do they know where he is?"

Ann nodded. The eyes of both filled on the instant, and at the same moment Ann flew from her perch. They sat hugging each other, for about a quarter of a minute.

"I'm free, I suppose," said Georgette.

"That's part of the trouble. It's a motive, isn't it? *And I'm free.* And that's a motive, isn't it? Not only Uncle Charles, you see—but brother John as well. Honest to God, Georgette, I don't know whether to laugh or cry."

She wiped her eyes with four square inches of cambric, and sniffed.

"Damn," she said. "Now I'll have to do it all over."

She walked to her dressing-table. A shadow fell into the room. From the wrought-iron balcony beyond a tall window, James de Forrest Fosdyke entered, one huge finger rubbing his black moustache with a sound like someone striking a light on the sandpaper of a match-box. He towered, on the carpet of old rose and blue, like a monstrous Assyrian god, his great masterful nose almost whistled with his breathing, and his opaque black eyes were unwinking; with a throat like a bull's, with limbs like

a more-than-lifesize statue, his head of crisply curling black hair had perhaps three of its curls lightly edged with silver. He was in a white silk shirt, which clung to the muscles of a huge chest, and was open to show a shining black cuirass of hair, covering it.

"'Goo! You *lovely*, you,'" he said to Ann, smiling. "This is a very interesting conversation you've been having, I must say, eh? Crazy like a tom-cat, eh?"

"Tom-cat was wrong," she said, dabbing at her nose with a powder-puff. "They can't get under. They just naturally can't get their furry bellies low enough, the way a snake can. You've got eyes like a snake, now I come to think of it. You're a furry snake, J.F.F. Listening outside persons' windows! What next!"

"I was coming to have a word with you, quiet, like. About the night's dark doings. But you've told me all I wanted to know, thanks. I suppose you *have*, eh? You don't know who came up to Acorns in the car just before Georgie and I got away, do you? Determined types. Shots were exchanged. I rather think they slew poor Allnut, the lodge-keeper, didn't they? Who were they?"

"Dunno."

"Oh, if you don't know—but see who's here! The barrynite, as Ted Caper names him. And your beloved, Ann."

Conway and Arnold came directly into the room, bathed and changed both.

"It *was* an interesting conversation, you know," said Conway pleasantly. "Dear old Hannah, what does for Tom Clarke, seems to have made a sort of blunder. We share your bathroom, Ann—Arnold and I."

Ann threw back her snowy throat and laughed a rippling peal of laughter.

"Paid in my own coin," she said. "The bezant is hard, but I didn't expect it to be black like a black stranger. De Lawd help us, Georgette, we-all got three big black ginnulmen on ou' hands right now. I unlocked the other door of the bathroom, when Hannah told me, without a thought of guile in her dear old head, that you and Mr. Winterset were being put in the other room. So now you see what a bad girl I can be, when my mind is set on it. I wanted to talk to him, alone and urgently. After Georgette came in here, of course I forgot all about it."

"Good!" said Conway, briskly. "Thus my pal and I, bathing

after you, were able to eavesdrop, as well as Mr. Fosdyke. Only in rather more comfort. So now we all know where we are."

"Ann," said Arnold, manfully resisting the temptation to touch his spectacles as he mounted them on his nose. "Do you know why I'm staying at Gallop Mile?"

She looked across at him, very serious at once.

"Someone burnt my cottage down to the ground, last night," he said.

She gave a low cry, and stood up.

"Everything I have," he said, "except you." He smiled. "Think of the insurance," he said. "We can contemplate gittin' spliced."

"Mr. Winterset," said Fosdyke, in a deep voice, "if you and Ann are going to get married, we shall be connections, through that agency. I am going to marry Mrs. Cumber. Everybody who knows you, in these parts, likes you very well. I beg you not to be an ass about your marriage. Ann will be wealthy. Probably you will join Ranaldshaws as Mr. Smallfield's partner—and mine, perhaps. In short, everything is now very different, for both of us. Forgive my blunt speaking. I say all this with the less diffidence because I, too, prevented from marrying by the circumstance that John Cumber was alive in this world, was also not in a financial position to get married *at all* until Georgette became the legatee of her husband's estate."

He turned to Conway with a daring smile, rasping at his moustache.

"*There's* glory for you," he remarked genially. . . . "Or motive—not to put too fine a point on it, eh?"

"Arnold," said Ann, still looking at him. "This fire. Someone was trying to—to——"

"Bump me off," said Arnold gloomily. "I do fear it, Ann."

"That's all right," Conway interrupted. "Nobody's going to get him, Ann, I promise you. Nobody will even try, from now on. This was the last throw. It's no longer true, since this morning, that Arnold's death would help the murder-plan. Rely on me."

He looked with a swift and flickering glance at everybody in turn. None made a betraying sign, unless Fosdyke's utter and studied expressionlessness was a negative betrayal of his thoughts.

"Not that I'm taking any chances." Conway's voice had become a drawl. "We've always got to remember that the plan probably involves a number of different people, separated by distances. So that all of them might not know, yet, that it's

no longer any use bumping off Arnold. There's the grey-haired old criminal in the red-and-white house, for example, over to Limpsland. *He* may not have heard."

Fosdyke's black eyebrows with their Lucifer twist at the corners came down over his black eyes.

"Mortenson, d'you mean?" he asked.

"Know him?" said Conway.

"Yes. Met him up here, riding. He's some sort of a high-up Government man. Very hush-hush. I believe he even has a police-guard. Chemist, or something, they say. War-work."

"Chemist, they say! That's interesting. Did he supply you with some rheumatism cure recently?"

This direct and deadly query produced an annihilating silence for several seconds. Then Georgette Cumber said, almost lazily, her sweet low tones floating into the air of that room of filtered sunshine and glowing shadows:

"Why, Mr. Mortenson isn't a *pharmacist*, Sir Brian—he's a real chemist. But, funnily enough, he did bring a bottle of rheumatism cure for Uncle Charles."

"That Inspector Goodman took it," said Ann unexpectedly. "What was left, I mean." She looked, as Conway had done, from face to face, and her eyes rounded into saucers, like a schoolgirl's. "Why," she exclaimed, "was Uncle Charles *poisoned*?"

"We'll know at the inquest," said Conway, quickly.

James de Forrest Fosdyke smiled a Mephistophelian smile. His black eyes lost their curious opacity. They snapped and sparkled.

"When is it, Conway?" he asked. "This afternoon, isn't it? I say! Are you free to represent us? *All of us*. Georgette, Ann, Arnold, and me, eh? Nice to have a top-class lawyer. What d'you say?"

Conway rubbed the cleft in his chin, then rumbled his black hair. These were, perhaps, betraying gestures. Then he grinned a Celtic grin.

"Right," he said. "I'll take you on. Now, Arnold, and Ann. Off to see the wizard!"

"What wizard would that be?" asked Georgette.

"The wizard of the North. The old firm. Samuel Smallfield. See you at the crowner's quest. You've all had papers? Convenient, doing it here at Gallop Mile, isn't it? Old Goodman's having the time of his life, and so I believe is dear old Tom Clarke. Know who the coroner is?"

All shook their heads, watching him.

"Dr. Heavibody. *He'll* put you through it, my little ones! *He'll* chase you around, family skeletons an' all. He's a barrister-at-law, you know, as well as a doctor. Ate his dinners in the Middle Temple about half a century ago. You'll *need* a good lawyer. Thank your beautiful luck you can afford to pay for one, now . . ." He turned in the doorway, waving airily at Fosdyke and his voluptuous widow as Ann and Arnold left the room. ". . . through the nose," he added: then, with a really malicious grin, "alive or dead."

James de Forrest Fosdyke put up a large hand to his face. It went past his black moustache and gently caressed his powerful, projecting nose.

"Good man, that," he murmured to Conway's broad, departing back. . . .

Thrust sat beside his driver, at the steps outside the house, perfectly stolid in the sunshine.

"Murder, arson, rape and robbery, Thrust, for sixty thousand pounds," said Conway, getting into the open car, seating himself, and twitching his exquisitely pressed trousers of fairy-weight Scotch tweed. "Murder we've had, and to spare. Arson also. Robbery—the contents of the safe were cash and securities. Got any rapine on your books, chum?"

Thrust made a gurgling noise. Ann vaulted the side of the car and sat on Arnold's knee, at Conway's side.

"You're a —, sir," said Thrust, "if I may be permitted to use such a word."

Ann, with a small scream, put her hands over her ears.

"Oh, Inspector *Thrust!*" she squeaked.

Thrust went redder than deep-red roses. Without turning, he said in a muffled voice: "Really, miss, I'm very, very sorry. I had no idea you were present. None!"

The car ran smoothly over Tom Clarke's good, thick gravel. Ann leaned forward and kissed Thrust's incarnadined ear.

"Pet!" she said. "I don't mind a bit."

Inspector Goodman, riding a bicycle towards them up the drive, plagued with heat and exertion, his teeth clicking with the excitement of his news, witnessing this incident, fell spectacularly into Tom Clarke's neatly trimmed laurels. The car stopped.

"Fowler's solution, sir," cried Goodman, struggling with a recalcitrant machine.

Conway whistled long and low.

"H'm. Bull's-eye, for you, Sir Brian," grunted Thrust. Goodman rose, leaving his bicycle.

"More than 90 per cent Fowler's solution, that rheumatism mixture was. Kill an elephant."

"It wouldn't, you know," said Ann. She put a ladylike hand to her hair. "In case you've been wondering, Inspector Goodman, why I'm not called up for the Forces, or directed to work in the lead-mines, or whatever, I must tell you I'm a chemist myself. Government slave just the same, of course. Strictly reserved. Well, not a chemist, you know, but a laboratory assistant, now enjoying a well-earned holiday."

"I know all about you, miss," said Goodman darkly.

"Sorry. Should have known. We never sleep. Watch and ward. All is known to us, the blue-serge guardians of the land. But about Fowler's solution. Enough of it would kill an elephant, if you could get an elephant to take enough of it. Do I make myself clear? Because you just couldn't. He'd vomit. (Or she.) And no man as was a man, and not rendered insensible, could swig a rheumatism mixture containing 90 per cent Fowler's solution. But if there was a man who could—and, merciful heavens, what men *are*, these days, you have to be a young woman laboratory assistant fully to understand—if there was a man, he most emphatically wasn't my Uncle Charles. *Your* Uncle Charles, perhaps—I wouldn't know. But not *mine*. If anybody gave my Uncle Charles a Nepali egg curry to which some felon had added a careless dash of white pepper, he'd know. He'd know. And so, shortly, would the said felon. He was like that, was my Uncle Charles."

"Very interesting," remarked Thrust. "But I don't think it's quite conclusive, miss, is it? We've got to do a lot of work before we can dismiss this bottle of rheumatism mixture from our case. You see, this is the only source of arsenic we've located yet, in the district."

"Wait till you hear who brought it to Fosdyke," murmured Conway. "You who wouldn't take seriously my tale of the sinister Mr. Mortenson. Uncharitable, you said I was. Not a tittle of evidence against him you said there wasn't. Or should it be you said there was?"

"Was," Arnold said.

"Wasn't," Ann said. They spoke simultaneously.

"Was," Arnold insisted. "You've already said 'not'. *Not* a tittle. There *was not* a tittle."

"Yes, Arnold," said Ann. "Nor a tattle."

"The billing of doves. But, Thrust," said Conway, "you do see now, charity and mercy on one side, and malice towards none, if this thug Mortenson—I can pick 'em, my boy, I've seen 'em by the score and I can't mistake the genuine, high-powered, multi-cylindereed crook—if this social blight fetched, brought, carried or conveyed a bottle of poisoned rheumatism mixture to Gallop Mile, *whether it killed the old man or not*, he's in this case up to here!" He touched the level line of his dark eyebrows "Like," he said, "the man in the fertilizer business."

"Perhaps," said Thrust, beginning to champ. They all became aware that Inspector Goodman's dentures were giving him trouble again. He was also pulling distractedly at the hairs projecting from his large ears, and tears of pain stood in his honest eyes.

"I wouldn't say," he said, "that this here rheumatism mixture is the only source of arsenic in the district that's known to us. There's weed-killer, in a country place like we are. Tons of it, you might say. And there's rat-poison. Very potent, and quite common. And sheep-dip. Up at Sir Benet Caulfield's model farm there's enough sheep-dip to float a liner."

"Arsenious Oxide, all those," said Ann, professionally grave. "White arsenic— As_4O_6 ."

"Then there's the firework factory in Heavenridge," Goodman went on. "Sir Benet again. Bengal fire, you know. Two parts realgar to twenty-four of nitre."

"What's realgar?" asked Thrust.

"You heat together arsenical pyrites and sulphur pyrites," said Ann, "thus producing arsenic disulphide. Or you get it native. It's used in tanning."

"Yes, miss," said Goodman. "And there's the tannery, isn't there, in Heavenridge?"

"This place is one enormous well of poison," said Conway, genuinely astonished. "What with this and what with that. Arsenic to the right of us, ditto to the left of us."

"Any other news, Inspector?" said Thrust to Goodman, giving an anxious glance at the dashboard clock.

"Well, no," said Goodman, with the air of a man who feels himself insufficiently appreciated. But he contrived to flutter one eyelid warningly.

"Good show, Inspector . . ." said Conway. A few minutes later they were bowling up the London road towards the brick-

pillared gates of Mr. Smallfield's house. After passing the gates they climbed steeply a hillside between banks of azaleas, and ran out in front of a low brick house, well built, unpretentious, fairly large, its woodwork glossy with good cream paint, and no nonsense. Such houses abound in favoured residential districts above the great manufacturing towns of Yorkshire, where substantial business men can get the clean air of the high wolds blowing through their bedroom windows. A white-clad figure, stocky and self-assured, rose from a deck-chair under some splendid dark cypresses bordering green grass lying like a lake in the hot sun. White linen gleamed in the shadows. They descended, and crossed the splendid lawn.

"I've had lunch put outside," said Mr. Smallfield, hatless, rubicund, immaculate in tailored white flannels. His clear blue eyes shone on them from beneath frosty eyebrows marking their course vividly over smooth red flesh. He had the jowls of a Roman emperor, a short, straight, blunt nose, a massive back-sloping forehead and cropped white hair. He shook the hands of Conway and Thrust, kissed Ann Cumber smackingly, and punched Arnold in the ribs.

"What's this I hear on the telephone from Fosdyke, Arnold?" he demanded. "Off with the boss's daughter, eh, lad? I've had my suspicions, you know, of you two—but nowt to do wi' me, when all's said and done. Now, sit down, all—no ceremony here. Eat and drink first, talk afterwards. I've plenty to tell you. . . ."

The lunch was plain but excellently cooked. A silent woman of about fifty waited at table, helped by a plump girl of fifteen who came over the grass with loaded trays, her brows puckered with concentration. Sam Smallfield, wizard of the North, addressed them briefly, emphatically and with great kindness in his quiet, deep voice. A good master, well served. After luncheon, to Conway's unfeigned delight, he lit a cigar such as only Prime Ministers and cartoonists' versions of bookmakers are ever seen with; it looked about a foot long.

"No doubt," he said, "there's a lot you'd like to know, from me, about this dreadful business. Ask me anything you like to, of course. But first, I want to tell *you* something."

Strong lips folded lovingly the dark cigar butt. The blue eyes closed against the drifting smoke. Sam Smallfield delivered to them his tale, uttered in terse sentences, with his facts properly grouped and marshalled, and absolutely no speculations to alloy their beautiful purposefulness. . . .

"Charles Ranaldshaw," he said, "was a very hard man. He was merciless. He always meant to make a big fortune, and he considered no one in making it. As far as I ever knew, he never exceeded the law, but he exacted his legal due always and everywhere. Such men make enemies.

"His nephew, John Cumber, was like him in his ruthlessness. He was very efficient in the business. But, unlike Charles, he had room in his life for other things. Marriage. Art. Books. He lived a fairly luxurious life, did John. He was very devoted to Ann, here—and to his wife, until his jealousy of her pretty ways with other men led him to separate from her.

"These two, Charles and John, together with myself, were the sole proprietors of Ranaldshaws. We held a third each, exactly. So that no major decision could be made by any one of us—it needed two in favour. There were times when Charles Ranaldshaw wanted to pursue a certain course of action as far as the firm was concerned. Then he had to get the consent of one of us. That's important to remember.

"In other things—his own concerns, where his own money alone was in question—of course, he did as he liked. He had a number of very large investments in all sorts of things. Enterprises of every kind. He rarely maintained these investments more than a year or two. He used to sell for quick profits, and keep his money moving. This was often very hard on other people. It didn't worry Charles. I may tell you he nearly ruined Sir Benet Caulfield, a neighbour of ours down here, by persuading him to buy certain stocks he was anxious to be rid of, just before they went almost to nowt. And the colt Spoof, which was picked by Sir Benet and James Fosdyke on a trip to Limerick—very nearly a world-beater, that colt—being owned by the three of them, equal shares, was another bone of contention. Fosdyke has been hard up for years, and Caulfield was made hard up, as I've told you. Both wanted to sell the colt. But Charles Ranaldshaw would neither consent to the sale, nor buy 'em out. 'Why should I?' he said. 'The arrangement is for Fosdyke and Caulfield to maintain him and pay his entrances and forfeits. I put the money down to buy the colt. They found him. I can make a lot more out of that colt than I'd get by selling him, as long as I'm able to oversee his training, as our contract stipulates.' There, you see the kind of man he was. Young Arnold here will bear me out in this description of Charles Ranaldshaw's character."

Arnold nodded, but said nothing.

"Probably all this is known, or surmised, by you gentlemen. And more besides, perhaps. I want to tell you my view of this thing as I see it, however, and as I've seen it coming for years. There's that cheque of his to Georgette Cumber, and the forgery. There's those missing notes and securities, that were in the office safe, and which Inspector Goodman, when I asked about them, told me were missing, after the murder. Lastly, there's rumours in the neighbourhood of some very queer goings-on concerning young Arnold—not to say yourself, Sir Brian, and the Detective-Inspector. One thing is certain, to me. John Cumber didn't poison his uncle. John Cumber didn't set people on Arnold. And John Cumber didn't take those securities. I wish I could say with equal certainty that John Cumber didn't forge that cheque."

He paused, rolling his cigar and enjoying their palpable astonishment.

"What reason would he have for doing that, sir?" asked Thrust.

"How and when could he have done it?" asked Conway.

"He *would* do it, come to think of it," said Ann.

Arnold nodded, watching his employer, but again he said nothing.

"Let me ask *you* one," said the Yorkshireman, smiling. "Why did Charles Ranaldshaw *write* that cheque?"

"Ah," said Conway, deeply interested, "according to Arnold's account, he *did* write it. Arnold saw him. The answer to your question, then, on your own description of Ranaldshaw, is simply that it was worth a thousand pounds to him, no less and perhaps no more, to have Georgette Cumber out of financial trouble for a time."

"That's it!" exclaimed Sam Smallfield, bringing a scarlet, gold-ringed hand down on his own plump thigh. "Bravo, lad. And it was worth that amount, I believe, for two reasons. First, it was bad for his business, for *our* business, if it got about that Georgette was in sore straits. The lass wouldn't take money from me, you know."

"Or from me," interposed Ann. "Such as I had, and what I had of it."

"That's right, that's right! Second, it was a blow at John Cumber, his own nephew. He didn't take John's side in the quarrel with Georgette, d'you see. Now, Detective-Inspector, I'm sure you'll begin to see for yourself the answer to *your* question.

"The reason why John Cumber would alter that cheque would be to get Georgette Cumber in bad with Charles Ranaldshaw. And she would have been in very bad indeed—if the old man had lived. I quote your words, Sir Brian. 'No less,' you said, 'and perhaps no more', than a thousand quid. Not *four* thousand! What do you say, Arnold? You knew him as well as I did. He had neither charity nor mercy in him."

"He would have done his utmost to gaol her," said Arnold, quietly. "It would have been a good way out, for him. It would have been an excuse to the world for doing nothing further for her."

Sam Smallfield nodded, his bright eyes twinkling.

"Now," he went on, "Sir Brian's question. How, and when? Aye, and where? I say John Cumber *could* have forged the cheque and *might* have done so. I don't say he did do so. He could have taken that envelope out of the post-rack in the office, altered it as it was in fact altered, and put it back. That's how, and where. When? He would have had to do it on Friday evening. Isn't that so, Arnold?"

Arnold considered.

"Yes," he said. "I saw the cheque signed on Friday afternoon. Mr. Cumber was in his room. I left him there when I went off for my holiday at about six. I think you were still in Nottingham, Mr. Smallfield?"

"Nay, lad. I came up Friday morning, gave the office a miss, for once, and was down here in Heavenridge for lunch on Friday. Now, the old man came down on Saturday, the day Georgette cashed her cheque. Poor lass! And by Monday it was certain that the old man wouldn't take it amiss. It's not, d'you see, a point that involves her in suspicion, unless she did the forgery. Or someone did it for her. I'm a practical man. I face facts. It's an obvious fact to me that we're all of us under suspicion of complicity in this murder, until it's cleared up, as it will be. True, I've less motive than anyone else. I've none, I suppose. But there it is. That's what I wanted you to hear. Now, if you want to hear anything more from me, over and above what I've already told Goodman, it must be as we go along. The inquest will be starting soon, and I take it we shall all of us need to be there."

"There are one or two points," said Thrust, when, after a visit to the house, and a final round of drinks, they gathered before Sam Smallfield's open door, arranging their seats in the police-car and in a vast 8-litre Bentley saloon which their host's

chauffeur was to take down to Gallop Mile. "Do you believe that Mr. Ranaldshaw had any dealings with race-gang toughs, sir—strong-arm men, or the like?"

Sam Smallfield, lost in the huge tonneau of his car, considered for a few moments before replying.

"I don't know," he said frankly. "Not for certain. It's by no means out of the question. He was often threatened, and he may well have taken precautions on special occasions. He'd know how to get into touch with such people, I'm sure."

Thrust took his place at the driver's side in the front of the police-car, which moved off first, with Ann and Arnold in the back. Conway sat down next to Sam Smallfield and they descended the hillside with aplomb, and proceeded to Gallop Mile at a vibrationless thirty-five miles an hour.

"There's those securities," said Conway, as they approached Tom Clarke's house up the long drive from the road. "They'd be his own property, I take it?" Sam nodded. "One other thing." They were at the door now, and Sam's chauffeur was stepping out of the driving-seat. "Do you know a man named Mortenson, or did Charles Ranaldshaw? Or John Cumber?"

Sam Smallfield sat in his seat finishing his cigar. His blue eyes puckered in concentration. He put the stub into an ash-tray and extinguished it.

"Mortenson, Mortenson," he said. "Where *have* I—wait a minute." His chauffeur opened the car door. Neither Sam nor Conway moved. "I rather think Fosdyke has mentioned the name to me," said Sam. "I rather think he was the chap who recommended some mixture for the old man." He started, and looked Conway straight in the eyes. "I see," he murmured, "I see. Mixture, eh? But—there's summat else, lad. We'll have to ring the office at Berkeley Square. When I went in, after the old man's death, and found John wasn't at the office, his secretary—John's secretary—told me someone of that name had been shown into John's room on Friday evening . . . and John wasn't there. He'd gone home. Forgotten the appointment. She thowt he were in lavatory, she said."

CHAPTER VI

"You must not tell us what the soldier, or any other man, said, sir," interposed the judge. "It's not evidence."

—BARDELL v. PICKWICK.

DR. HEAVIBODY sat down. People shuffled their feet, coughed, blew their noses. The coroner waited for silence, staring up the room with fierce, unfocussed, bloodshot eyes. His thick stick leaned against the table before him. His breathing was regular, but fierce. The jury looked upon him with respectful awe. The packed room swayed with heads trying to get an uninterrupted view of him. They were in the hall of Gallop Mile. Whimsically solemn, Tom Clarke, foreman of the jury, looked out upon that scene enacted in his own home (that had also been his great-grandfather's home), under the presiding genius of that medico-legal ancient of days who was the most respected, the most feared, and the most liked man in Heavenridge. The local audience expected fireworks from Dr. Heavibody's first inquest on a murder; the non-local visitors, themselves more intimately concerned with the proceedings than any in the audience yet guessed, dreaded the huge, ogre-like figure brooding upon the task in hand.

"The police," boomed Heavibody, "have asked me to take only formal evidence of identification, and to adjourn this inquest into the death of Charles Ranaldshaw. You've seen the body. You've identified it. I'm not going to adjourn."

A murmur of pleased excitement rose. It died away when the doctor seized his great stick and thumped the floor until the water-jug on his table rattled and sang.

"I see no reason to adjourn. The police have their duty to do. They have to find the murderer and bring him to justice. I have my duty to do. It is to sit with a jury and to pronounce a verdict as to how Charles Ranaldshaw met his death. In order to arrive at that verdict it will be necessary for us to examine the testimony of relevant witnesses, who have been summoned to attend here. After we have heard what they have to say, we shall pronounce. Any dozen reasonable men and women should be able to make up their minds, when properly guided and completely in-

formed, as you will be, how a man has met his death, whether by fair means or foul, and at whose hands. The police, it seems to me, make a great deal too much fuss and bother about a very simple matter.

"The first thing is to know what killed him. Call Dr. Jones."

Dr. Jones was Heavibody's sole rival in that highly skilled mystery, the cure of bodies, in Heavenridge. He was a thin young man whose chief hopes were for the future. After all, no doctor lives for ever. He had, he considered, time on his side. Almost 50 years of it, on a conservative estimate. He was liked locally, and many went to him as well as to Heavibody, and principally for sympathy—not only for Dr. Jones, but for themselves. Of this commodity they had learned to expect very little indeed from the old man.

Dr. Jones was brief and comprehensible. Charles Ranaldshaw had ingested, at some time during the previous Saturday night, a stated dose of arsenious oxide, amply sufficient to cause death within two hours. In Dr. Jones' opinion, it was unlikely that he would have administered the poison to himself, because of its nauseating effects.

Ted Caper, a juryman, whispered something to Tom Clarke, who rose from his padded chair, polite, debonair, exquisitely courteous.

"Never say Kentishmen haven't a head for logic," rumbled the coroner, when Tom Clarke had spoken. "The jury want to know, Dr. Jones, how the nauseating effects of ingesting arsenious oxide are held to preclude the deceased person from having taken it himself?"

"Why—er—he would have vomited."

"He *did* vomit. He was as sick as a horse."

"And then, the—er—unpleasantness. An extremely revolting taste."

"'E *did* taste it, didn't 'e, sir? 'Owever 'e took it, 'e went through all that, didn't 'e?" demanded Ted Caper with great respect.

"Silence, by thunder!" roared the coroner, crashing his stick down on the table and breaking a glass to smithereens.

"Sorry, sir," said Ted.

"I think, Dr. Jones, the point is well made. I don't think we can take the evidence you give us as entirely conclusive, between suicide and murder. Thank you, sir. Call Inspector Goodman."

He looked at Goodman as the ogre must have looked at Jack.

And Goodman was no giant-killer. His teeth began to be heard. He gathered some confidence as he proceeded uninterrupted, however, and the crowded, hushed room heard the whole horrific detail of Charles Ranaldshaw's death . . . the scene at his bedside, the will, the missing securities and money from the safe, all told in the plain and factual prose of a policeman's notes. There was no skipping. Heavibody saw to it that every last detail was remorselessly paraded. Conway sat fascinated. Thrust writhed.

"Police work isn't possible, like this, sir," he harshly whispered to the barrister. "Can't you stop him, for Heaven's sake? What if he goes on like this about every other blessed thing?"

"How much does he know?" breathed Conway between apparently unmoving lips. "He can't prompt the answers unless he knows 'em, or guesses 'em. *I* think he's been chatting to Superintendent Cox. . . ."

Thrust looked at the malignant old man behind the table, and uttered an audible groan. It soon became apparent that the coroner knew, or guessed, everything. He treated the fascinated jury, the spellbound crowd, to a perfect *exposé* of all that had been happening, all that they had gossiped about, brooded over, and listened to wild and unprobable rumours of, for days past—the attacks on Arnold, the deaths of the gangsters, the interrupted return of John Cumber's dead body to Acorns, the incident of the hand-grenade in the chalk-pit, the adventure by the haystack. And Georgette's cheque. . . .

Dr. Heavibody certainly cleared the mental air of Heaven-ridge, much as he was wont to clear the physical air of its cottage homes, if necessary by violence, if necessary alone.

"Mrs. Cumber," he said, with what was, past all question, intended to be a pleasant smile, "do you know, or have you ever heard the name of, Gasher Gibbs?" And he turned his great leer on the astonished Thrust.

"No, Dr. Heavibody," answered Georgette, with a limpid face. . . . The coroner switched at once to the matter of the forged cheque for four thousand pounds.

"I paid it in, of course, Dr. Heavibody," said Georgette with a friendly smile.

"Did you alter the amount?"

"Dr. Heavibody! Certainly not! It was for a rather larger sum than I had expected, but I could use it, you know."

"Did you show the cheque to anyone before cashing it?"

"Not I. I simply fled for the bank. I only had sevenpence-ha'penny."

James de Forrest Fosdyke, towering in the front row, gave a bellow of laughter; his eyes snapped black sparks. Dr. Heavibody looked upon him long and thoughtfully.

"Thank you, Mrs. Cumber," he said. "Call Mr. Fosdyke. Now Mr. Fosdyke, although this is a solemn enough occasion, it seems that you are able to find it funny. I want you, if you will, to tell us all you know about these goings-on. Here we have a man poisoned in his bed, sir, damnably poisoned. He leaves a note blaming his nephew for the murder. But his nephew, it appears, is dead already, ha? Let me tell you at once that although the inquest on John Cumber won't be held here, because his body turned up in Surrey, I have information that *he* was murdered, too. A pretty plot, you see, Mr. Fosdyke.

"Somebody wanted to kill Charles Ranaldshaw *and* John Cumber. Why?"

"Because," said Fosdyke, "they were a couple of blackguards. Blacker than the inside of a fox. You seem to be bent on running this inquest on highly original lines. You seem determined to turn it into a bally lesson in crime-detection. And in me you have a willing abettor. I'm all for it. Never did believe in hushing things up. Out with the facts. Speak the truth and shame the devil. I couldn't agree with you more, Doctor. So I say—those two were murdered by some knowing lad who realized that he was doing a job that had long needed doing."

"The Law," thundered the coroner, "cannot accept any justification for murder, sir. This is a Court of Law."

"Run it like one, then," said Fosdyke, grinning. "Dammit, you can't have your bally cake and eat it. You asked me, straight out, why somebody wanted to kill Ranaldshaw and Cumber. Did you expect me to answer that some naughty wicked man, with no respect for the Law, must have done it just to upset *you*?"

Heavibody's great yellow teeth came out in a grin like a gargoy's.

"You don't have to answer, at all," he remarked placidly. "But you might try to observe the decencies here, whatever you do elsewhere. I've got another question for you. Did *you* poison Ranaldshaw and Cumber?"

Thrust gaped at the coroner, glanced quickly at Conway, and then swivelled in his place to watch Fosdyke, who was rubbing his big nose.

"No," said Fosdyke, "I didn't. But I had very good reasons to be glad someone did," he added handsomely.

"What reasons?"

"Well, I wanted to marry Mrs. Cumber."

The effect of this pronouncement upon an audience comprised of persons of both sexes to whom during all their adult days the infinite variety of the speaker's amours had been a constant and delicious topic, unwithered by time and unstaled by custom, might be describing as moving. Some of those present had been intimately involved in them, and could scarcely believe that *anyone* could get J.F.F. to the altar; these reflected that time marches on—he must be fifty if he was a day—no one could have brought him to it when younger. Others, the men, merely contemplated the contours of Georgette Cumber . . . dark women . . .

"Sex," said Dr. Heavibody, grinding his great teeth. "Any other reasons?"

"I was made confoundedly hard up by Charles Ranaldshaw's refusal to work with me on a colt we owned. His death makes things easier. We can sell him, f'rinstance."

"Money," growled Dr. Heavibody. Thrust had his head sunk between his fists and was staring in hopeless misery at the floor.

"Pretty strong motives for murder, what?" said Fosdyke chattily.

"The strongest, sir, the strongest," answered the coroner. "I think, Mr. Fosdyke, the jury would like to know more about this colt which was owned by you and Mr. Ranaldshaw jointly."

"I bet they would," answered Fosdyke, with a wide smile.

Ted Caper scratched his head at this point, then looked up the room to try to catch the eye of James Spink.

"This colt Spoof," said Fosdyke, "was picked by me at Limerick Horse Show. I spotted him, and I said to myself: 'I wish Tom Clarke was here. If Tom Clarke was here, I'd have that colt!' I walked about the town and I met Sir Benet Caulfield. I told him about the colt. 'I'll get the money,' he said—and he did. When we got back to England I found that old Ranaldshaw had put up the money, and wanted to race the colt. It was all right for him, d'you see, because he had the capital. Later, when we wanted to realize the speculation, the old man wouldn't budge. We could have sold him for a packet."

"Did you and Sir Benet Caulfield play bridge at this house with Charles Ranaldshaw on the night of his death?"

"Yes. We played for some hours."

"Who else was present?"

"Our host, the foreman of your jury; Miss Cumber; Mrs. Cumber; Mrs. Caulfield; Sam Smallfield . . . I can't remember who else."

"You gave Charles Ranaldshaw a bottle of medicine?"

"Yes. Rheumatism cure. Feller who goes out riding with us left it with me, telling me to hand it to the old man."

"Who was this feller?"

"Chap named . . ." He turned, frowning, to where Georgette Cumber sat. "What *was* that chap's name?" he asked her.

"Mr. Mortenson," said Georgette.

"That's it—Mr. Mortenson. Funny old fish. Never liked the feller."

"Did you ever meet a man named Gasher Gibbs?"

Fosdyke's dark face was utterly untroubled. He shook his head.

"What did you go to John Cumber's house for, last night?"

"Have a look round. See if I could find John Cumber's body."

"Taking his widow with you?"

"Yes. You see, Mrs. Cumber wasn't to know her husband was dead, then."

"How did *you* know?"

"By using my loaf. I knew, just as well as you did, that there were some mighty funny things going on. I knew Mr. Winterset had been attacked. Never you mind how. I knew John Cumber was missing—and that the old man had left a note accusing him. I fancied I could see the whole plot. Bump off the old man, blaming the nephew. Nephew commits suicide because of remorse. *But* Mr. Winterset saw the nephew, already dead, before the job at Gables was over. So, bump off Mr. Winterset. Enter Sir Brian Conway. Bumpers-off get bumped. Then, they'd have to get rid of the body—John Cumber's body—wouldn't they? And they did, didn't they? There you are, then. . . ."

"*Cui bono?*" demanded Dr. Heavibody, transfixing the jury with a leer as soon as Fosdyke had stood down. "Who profited? And, therefore, who was most likely to have done it? I'm going to suggest to you that your verdict is a plain matter of common sense. Listen.

"Charles Ranaldshaw was poisoned either through drinking the rheumatism cure—though I warn you that that is extremely unlikely—or, more likely by far, by taking some tablets, six or

seven, under the impression that they were his ordinary bedtime dose of aspirin. He'd never have known his mistake until it was too late, in the latter case, and when he was alone on the upper floor of his house, in bed, with a deaf housekeeper downstairs. About the time he died, Arnold Winterset saw what we must assume was the dead body of his nephew, in a car parked near to Gallop Mile and to Mr. Fosdyke's house. Money and securities were missing from a safe in the old man's room. But it is not known *when* they were taken.

"On the late afternoon of the day before his death Charles Ranaldshaw wrote a cheque for one thousand pounds in his London office. It was cashed by the payee, Mrs. Cumber, next morning, in Heavenridge, after the amount had been altered to four thousand pounds, and altered with sufficient skill to deceive the local bank manager—but not, apparently, with sufficient skill to deceive the secretary of Ranaldshaws Limited, principally because that gentleman had witnessed the signing of the cheque in London, and knew the amount. He was therefore suspicious, and was *looking* for a forgery. Therefore, he found it.

"The death of Charles Ranaldshaw on Sunday night made it unlikely that that forgery would be contested—but only provided that John Cumber, who would have not only contested it, but would probably have taken criminal proceedings against the payee, was also dead. The cheque has not been contested by the legatees of Charles Ranaldshaw and John Cumber, who are, I understand, likely to be Mrs. Cumber and Miss Cumber. Because I should tell you that, even if the two deceased persons have made other testamentary dispositions, these two ladies will have, as dependants, an incontestable claim to a large part of the two estates. We may also assume that the two estates comprise a considerable fortune in money and goods, and a share or shares in a prosperous bookmaking concern, one of the largest in the country."

Mr. Samuel Smallfield stood up, and Dr. Heavibody courteously gestured to him to speak.

"Since we're washing so much dirty linen in public," said Sam, his red face glowing like a round sun, "I might as well tell you, to the best of my knowledge, what the financial position is likely to be. Mr. Ranaldshaw's last will, apart from the one he may have written on his death-bed, leaves his shares in the Company equally to John and Ann Cumber, and the rest of his money to Ann Cumber. And Mr. Cumber's will leaves his possessions and

shares, presumably now including half of Mr. Ranaldshaw's shares, to Ann Cumber, with a not inconsiderable annuity to his estranged wife, payable by the trustee, on condition that she does not marry again. The control of the colt Spoof, I believe, reverts absolutely to Sir Benet and Mr. Fosdyke in accordance with the terms of their peculiar contract."

He sat down amid a hubbub of public comment which was only silenced by repeated thwacks on the table of Dr. Heavibody's stick.

"We thus see," the coroner continued, "that material benefits—and by material benefits," he said with a formidable leer, "I mean MONEY, something you can all understand, eh? Cash to spend, cars and frocks and big houses to buy, and women and everything your heart can desire, eh? Very well, then—material benefits, *large* material benefits come directly, as the result of these two deaths, to Miss Ann Cumber, Mrs. Cumber, Mr. Fosdyke—partly so long as he *doesn't* marry Mrs. Cumber, but to a considerable extent if he does (even supposing she can't upset a very malevolent will), and finally to Sir Benet Caulfield. Also, I suppose, to Mrs. Caulfield and to whoever is so fortunate as to marry Miss Cumber.

"So much for material benefits. But there are other benefits, too—difficult though it may be for your unwholesome minds to rank these in anything like the same scale of importance. I have been curing the bodies and damning the minds of most of the people in this room for sufficiently long to be fully apprised of the kind of mentality most of you possess. . . . I proceed. Important benefits accrue by the deaths of these two persons, to all who were able to do, after those deaths, things they badly wanted to do, before 'em. Persons whose hearts' desires could now be satisfied, where once those desires seemed for ever impossible of achievement. Such as marrying, for instance. Obviously, nobody could marry Mrs. Cumber. It may have been difficult for somebody or other to marry Miss Cumber. Then, the world always contains people whose greatest desire is for revenge, or restitution. But still, you are right in assessing material benefits from these two deaths as a more urgent and compelling motive for murder than any other, if only because most other people are just like you. That, if I may say so, is why you are empanelled here as a jury of twelve plain and reasonable persons.

"There, you have motive. But what about means? If we could find one person with a motive for murder, and that person

could be proved to have access to the means of that murder to a far greater extent than anybody else, that would considerably narrow our field of suspicion. So much is clear. I shall now enlighten you as to the means used in the murder of Charles Ranaldshaw.

"I have personally examined the bottle of aspirins found on the dead man's bedside table, and the bottle of so-called rheumatism cure handed to him by Mr. Fosdyke. And in collaboration with my medical colleague, Dr. Jones, I have carried out an autopsy on the dead man's body. He was, to put it plainly, full of arsenic. He had somehow imbibed a perfectly enormous amount of arsenious oxide, enough to kill the whole lot of us in this room. And he had taken it *all at once*. Now, a mixture that was 90 per cent Fowler's solution of arsenic, which the police have testified was found in the bottle of rheumatism cure, would *not* have so filled the dead man with arsenic, if you subtract the amount, found in that bottle afterwards, from the contents of that bottle when full. This leaves an important subsidiary question for us to tackle later—why was he given a bottle of rheumatism mixture containing 90 per cent Fowler's solution of arsenic? But it settles another and a main question. Charles Ranaldshaw had atrocious muscular rheumatism. The big muscles of his back, his groins and his thighs, were laminated with strips of fibrin, and there were nodules of fibrin in big deposits all along those muscles. When a man has muscular rheumatism so badly, not only is movement an agony, but rest produces an agony even greater. A normal night's sleep is impossible, especially when the weather is humid. As I've told many of you so many scores of times, it's not damp, or rain, that produces rheumatic muscular pain, it's a condition of humidity before moisture has condensed out of the air. And last Sunday night's humidity was abnormally high for the summer. So that Charles Ranaldshaw, I am personally convinced, would have been unable to get to sleep without a dose of some powerful analgesic. He would *necessarily* take a pain-killer. What pain-killer did he take?"

Thrust, now, had raised his head and was listening with the closest attention to the formidable old man.

"Normally, he dosed himself with acetyl salicylic acid, or aspirin. He had with him by his bedside a bottle of 100 aspirins of a well-known proprietary make. That bottle, my friends, contained 100 tablets, as Inspector Goodman has informed you.

Not only that, but the wax seal over the cork was not entirely broken. I believe our murderer overlooked that detail. It is perfectly clear to me that someone transposed that bottle for a bottle identical in outward appearance but containing tablets made up with arsenious oxide, that the old man took at least six or seven of those tablets, and that subsequently the bottle was replaced by the original aspirin bottle, which was brought down from London. An empty aspirin bottle, probably the one he was seen using when playing bridge on Saturday evening, was in his overcoat pocket.

"If I am right, therefore, and I think I am, the means used to kill Charles Ranaldshaw was the substitution, at some time between the purchase of those 100 tablets of aspirin at a reputable chemist's in Bond Street, and the hour at which the murdered man retired to bed. A necessary corollary of this, I think, is that the murderer should have been near the bedroom in order to replace the poisonous bottle, on the bedside table with the bottle which, had he or she but known it, was quite full. It would not be many people, I assume, of those who had a motive for this murder, who could have used this means—because this means necessitates the opportunity of being close to Charles Ranaldshaw between *two* vital periods of time.

"Of all those persons, therefore, of whom we can say that we know they had motive for murdering this man (there may well be others, unknown to us), if we can say with reasonable certainty that any of them were ever in possession of the means used, and also had the opportunity of carrying those means into effect, then we shall be altogether justified in arriving at a verdict of wilful murder against them. It will be necessary to establish to our own satisfaction that they were *able* to acquire made-up tablets of arsenious oxide, that there is reasonable ground to suppose they did acquire such tablets, and that they had an opportunity—possibly by using an agent who would then become an accessory before the fact of murder—of replacing Mr. Ranaldshaw's normal aspirin tablets with this deadly dose, and of subsequently reversing that exchange before Sunday morning when the police arrived."

The old gentleman blew out his cheeks, and seized again his thick stick.

"You probably understand, now, why the police asked for a formal identification of the body and an adjournment of the inquest. Their task is not yet completed. They will have to carry

out long and patient enquiries in order to determine just which—if any—of the persons, upon whom suspicion is thrown merely because they *benefit* from the murder, had access to the means used, and had opportunity to apply them, within those very hard limits of time and place. See? And then, there's this mysterious Mr. Mortenson, butting into their nice, easy case with his preposterous bottle of poisoned rheumatism cure. Probably a red herring. And all these gangsters, running amok about the place. And what the gangsters had in their possession."

He leered amiably at Georgette Cumber, who looked surprised and pleased.

"Pictures and things," said Dr. Heavibody. "T'ck, t'ck. Well, ladies and gentlemen, let's not waste any more time, eh? You can decide your verdict, I should think, without leaving your places. It can't be suicide, because there's no empty bottle. So it's murder all right. Against a person or persons bally-well unknown."

Tom Clarke signified the wish of one of his jurymen to ask a question. Audience was graciously granted and Ted Caper rose in his place.

"Couldn' you ask, sir," he said, "whether this 'ere colt will or will not be run in the Merston Stakes?"

"Certainly," said the coroner. "I can ask any question I damn'-well please. Call Mr. Fosdyke."

The part owner of Spoof lifted his great nose.

"Yes," said James de Forrest Fosdyke, succinctly. . . .

The jury returned a unanimous decision on the lines so clearly indicated to them. The hall emptied of all save the Gallop Mile residents and the police.

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"Crikey," said Thrust. "That was historic, that was! Where in hell do we go from here, Sir Brian?"

"Why, we go straight to Limpsland. We confront this Mortenson. He's naught but a canker on the case. Him and his blasted rheumatism cures! I'll tell you what—all these alibis we shall have to try to bust won't be worth looking at if all the time this erk Mortenson has been the agent of the murderer! Get me, Thrust?"

Conway wagged a finger at the pugnacious face lifted to stare thoughtfully out of the hall window to a ten-acre spread of

sunlit meadow, across which raced a ruddy equine figure with tail spread behind him.

"Attend! I say that the person who socked me on the back of the bean in that fire we fought, and chucked that bomb at us in the gravel-pit, and brought John Cumber's body home to Acorns, and, perhaps, directed the thugs who were after Arnold, and burned Arnold's cottage down, may have been someone, such as the Mortenson, operating independently of our neatly typed list of suspects. Motive? The most obvious in the world—pay! Specie! Sums of currency! A goddam hireling. Why, if you have a fast-working thug of that kind on the payroll, you could have him do *all* the dirty work, including bumping the two bookies. He might have been waiting in old Ranaldshaw's wardrobe, all the time. He's a figure operating on the fringe of our field of vision—we simply don't have tabs on him. What a lovely murder-plot, if I'm right, eh?"

"Dear me," said Detective-Inspector Thrust, pursing his lips, "you go rather fast. We haven't any evidence at all about this chap Mortenson—except that he gave Fosdyke (so Fosdyke says) a bottle of poison which apparently didn't poison anybody."

"We have the testimony of Arnold, and Ann Cumber, that he pursued them with intent this morning. I saw the codger myself, a-sitting in his shiny car looking just like a combination-picture of every crook-type in the rogue's gallery. Oh, come, come! Mortenson's a crook, I give you my word. I ought to know."

"Doesn't alter the fact that the local police, at Limpsland, say he's a highly respectable local party, about whom they have instructions from the Special Branch to keep a jealous eye on him because he's down here doing important Government experimental work."

"You—don't—say!" murmured the baronet. "This is *very* interesting. I think I'll telephone Comrade Williamshaw. Your late Chief still operates the Diplomacy Squad, don't he? John Williamshaw will give me the true, the blushful *mise-en-scène* of this devious Mortenson."

"But—surely you don't doubt the Special Branch?" gasped Thrust.

"No. I doubt my own senses," said Conway, leaving the hall in search of privacy and a telephone.

"Can we enter this scene, just about here?" Ann Cumber called, across the big room, to Thrust; a group of residents was

gathered at the far window, some of them using binoculars, to watch the colt Spoof's gallop. Thrust bethought him of the elementary rule of police-work: that you don't let in laymen, outsiders (and suspects), to your secret councils—the rule that Conway always broke and with such spectacular and consistent success. *When* was he going to be able to get on with this case without the embarrassing company and conversation of Miss Ann Cumber and Mr. Arnold Winterset? No use denying that these were high on the list of suspects, both of them, in the light of Dr. Heavibody's remorseless review of motive. . . .

"Well, miss, Sir Brian and I are just following up a few routine enquiries——"

"I see. Come on, Arnold, my pet—not wanted."

"That colt has the Merston Stakes in his feed-bag," announced Fosdyke from the window. "We'll never get anything better than 3 to 1 on, I suppose. Still, we must summon all our resources. Every pound we can raise will return to us with six and eightpence added. Nothing can go wrong. A dead mile, less than twenty runners, plenty of room across . . . nothing *can* go wrong. My heart is like a singing bird."

"And then, I suppose, we sell?" said Georgette.

"We sell. Sixty thousand pounds!"

"What would you do, sir, for sixty thousand pounds?" asked Thrust, prompted by some inner devil—which usually he kept properly chained. Fosdyke bent black eyebrows on him, and two vertical lines appeared in the leathery cheeks on each side of the huge Fosdyke nose. Thrust expected, for a moment, a violent outburst. But Fosdyke spoke mildly, almost wonderingly.

"I *did* say that, you know. I did. But I would have sworn I said it under circumstances so highly confidential that nobody would have known I said it. Murder, arson, rape and robbery, wasn't it? For sixty thousand pounds? And the man I said it to has been murdered, and so I'm about to lay hands on the money. What? Inspector, my respect for the police is born. I don't say it's enhanced, because hitherto I didn't have any. But this is really very smart of you."

"Very foolish, I think," mumbled Thrust, staring into the black orbs and beginning to champ.

"For reminding me? No. Set your mind at rest, Inspector. Unwise if you were ever going to get me into a dock, but you aren't. You're not nearly smart enough for that."

The dark angry blood came up in Thrust's face and neck.

He put his hand to his inside breast pocket and took out a wallet. Everybody watched him, silently. With a deliberate motion of thick forefinger and thumb he slid out of a paper envelope three glossy, small, black-and-white photo-prints.

"Mrs. Cumber," he said raspingly, ignoring Fosdyke, "I want you to look at these."

He shuffled the prints together and walked straight up to her, watching her face intently as he handed them to her. She accepted them; she turned them over, giving the uppermost print a negligent glance; her head stooped down over it swiftly and she looked at it closely; she looked also at the others, deliberately, each in turn. Only then did she lift her face to Thrust's. Colour flooded her rich cheeks, but her eyes were twin, glorious, dark pools of candid laughter.

"Inspector! Wherever did you find them?" she said. Her black lashes drooped and she stole another glance at the photographs. "They're rather fetching, aren't they—really?" she murmured. "I wonder——"

"They were in the personal possession," said Thrust with great deliberation, "of one Gasher Gibbs. You say you don't know the name—or the man?"

"No, I don't," she replied simply, and looked across the room, beyond Thrust, to Fosdyke. "James, you ought to see these. I—I didn't know they were being taken. It must have been at Brighton, I think. He was always doing it, you know. Him and his camera! What a man!"

"Who? What man?" cried Fosdyke, who had marched to her side, snatched the prints and stared at them, his eyebrows almost quivering, and now stood glaring about him as if seeking that privileged photographer who had created them.

"John, darling. My husband," she explained to Thrust. "He was a photographer, you know—one of these miniature camera fanatics. I must say, though, I usually *knew* what he was doing. . . . I mean, the pose, and everything. I mean, you know—well, you know what I mean."

"I'm afraid, Inspector," said Fosdyke ominously, "that I shall have to confiscate these. I'll give you a proper receipt, if you need one. But under no circumstances whatever shall I permit them to leave my possession. You can do just what you please in the way of official action, and be damned."

A great light had illumined Thrust's mind, however. . . . In that mental radiance he saw the competent Gasher Gibbs over-

hauling the pockets of a dead man, consigned to his care in a disused chalk-pit, before disposing of it according to his orders.

"You may certainly keep them, Mr. Fosdyke," he remarked mildly. "Don't bother about a receipt. In the event that it proves absolutely essential to the ends of justice that they should be produced, I'll rely on you."

For perhaps the first time since his exciting adolescence, James de Forrest Fosdyke blushed.

"Inspector," he said, "you're a gentleman. Thank you, sir. Allow me to apologize for my rudeness hitherto. You make me quite ashamed."

"I quite understand, sir," said Thrust rather equivocally. "Don't mention it. . . ."

Conway came striding back into the hall.

"*En avant, mes camerades*," he cried, "*il faut en finir*. Have at him, this Mortenson. He's one of the five most important men in England this day. So says Authority. He's practically indispensable to the war effort, he is a repository of the toppest kind of top secrets, he is guarded like something precious. What do you think of *that*?"

"I—er—what do *you* think of it, Sir Brian?" said Thrust.

"I'd tell you, in one very short and unattractive word——" said the baronet, seizing, each by an arm, Arnold and his Ann, and walking out into the sunshine. Thrust followed them, sighing lightly, and seated himself next to Conway in the driving-seat of the Mercédès while the lovers disposed themselves, rather inelegantly, behind. "—Except," Conway went on, "for the ears of the young, distended as always to catch the flying rumour of events, especially when couched in unprintable terminology. . . . I just don't believe a damn' word of it, Thrust, that's all."

From the house came Sam Smallfield, and Sam's chauffeur walked to the vast Bentley.

"That," said Sam genially, puffing out his cheeks and fixing a bright blue eye on Conway, "as they'd say in Yorkshire, was an inquest and a 'alf, that was, lad. Could any small bit of it be said to be at all legal, like?"

"It was a confounded scandal," said a crisp voice behind Sam. Sir Benet Caulfield came past him down the steps and paused to shake Conway by the hand, raising his snap-brim, shallow Scott's hat as he did so, and acknowledging the existence of Thrust, Ann and Arnold with a brief nod, a bright twinkle, and a hand lightly brushing his beautifully cropped moustache.

"If Heavibody had had the nerve to put me in the box, I'd have left the room," said Sir Benet. "I almost left the room, anyway. Did anyone, ever, hear of such goings-on? Damnable—oh, damnable! I beg your pardon, Miss Cumber! A man moved, what?"

"Oh, it was all right," said Sam, chuckling. "No bones broken, man, and a lot of fresh air let in where the atmosphere was a bit stuffy. I must say I thought he summed-up fair enough."

"He did—he did! Heavibody's no fool. Made you sweat, I dare say, Inspector, what? I beg your pardon, Miss Cumber! No word for a little lady's ears, they tell me, though the language I hear from my land-girls teaches *me* somethin', begad. Sprigs of nobility, too. Damnable, oh, damnable! I *beg* your pardon!"

"Was it legal, Sir Brian, I'd like to know?" asked Sam Smallfield.

"It's really very hard to say," answered Conway. "Theoretically there seems nothing whatever to stop a coroner asking anybody anything, and making whatever comments he likes on what they say in reply—or even on what they don't say. On the other hand, he can do very little with anyone, appropriately summoned, who takes equal liberty to sauce him back, or is what the Courts call dumb of malice."

"Compromise," said Arnold, suddenly.

"That's it—the English way. Do as you're done by—be done by as you do—give and take. Compromise is the lubricant of the land."

"I'm against it," affirmed the General. "Don't like it, never did. Right's right, and wrong's wrong. Know your own mind. Why compromise? What? Why give in, dammit? I *beg* your pardon, Miss Cumber."

"Dunno," said Conway, slowly, thoughtfully.

"Tell you something, sir," said Sir Benet Caulfield. ("Ah—thanks, thanks—glad to——" he interrupted himself to exclaim to Sam's gestured invitation to ride home in the Bentley. He waited until Sam had made his *adieux*, and had walked to the car, then spoke directly to Conway before following.) "Fosdyke was right. That feller Ranaldshaw deserved all he got. And the nephew feller, too. No sense in being soft. Right's right; what? But—you'll never know who did it."

He gave a triumphant wave of his hat and left them.

Conway pressed the starter, and sat for a minute or more, his right foot teasing the throttle to a soft motor-music; his eyes

were dreamy. Thrust waited, unendingly patient. Arnold slipped an arm about the shoulders of Ann, and she moved closer to him.

"Goodman is to meet us at Mortenson's house?" asked Conway, negligently. Thrust nodded. "So is Superintendent John Williamshaw, that saturnine, brilliant, and rigidly Nonconformist policeman," said Conway, gently setting the car in motion. They ran down the drive, turned into the main road, and ran smoothly north at the pace of a Victorian carriage. "There are such a lot of things I don't know, Thrust, through immersing myself in combats, rescues, and deeds of derring-do, to the exclusion of honest thinking—the essence of the contract, after all, where detection is concerned. I take it detection *is* concerned, huh?"

"It concerns me," said Thrust. "It's my job, sir. I'm a detective, you know."

"Yes. Well, the sort of things I don't know, the sort of things you and Goodman have been patiently compiling into an impressive portfolio of beautiful fact, are the movements of persons on Friday and Saturday and Sunday, and the location of the automobiles around and about the neighbourhood. The other information—about the Cumber marriage, and the offers for the colt Spooft, I have picked up as I have gone along. But the persons—and their modes of transportation—these are now cardinally important. Read, therefore."

Thrust rolled back the elastic from his notebook and proceeded with an uninterrupted recital of facts, all the way to the outskirts of Limpsland. . . .

"Right," said Conway, who had listened attentively, "behold, the 'aystack, somewhat the worse for wear, which gave us sanctuary this morning. This Mortenson's house, the children tell me, is just round the corner, as prosperity once was."

The large machine slowed to a walking-pace at the right-angle turn near the elderberry thicket, and nosed slowly forward. A policeman, holding a bicycle, came in view. He put up a hand. Conway halted the car.

"G'd arfternoon, sir," said the policeman. "Can I trouble you for your identity cards?"

Silently, they handed him little grey slips of cardboard. He saluted Thrust.

"Special instructions, sir," he said. "There's a V.I.P. lives along the road."

"Mr. Mortenson?"

"Tha's right, sir. Big red-an'-white house, 'alf a mile along."

They proceeded decorously down the straight.

"Very Important Persons," said Conway, "don't spend the early hours of the morning gandering out of bedroom windows at necessarily infrequent passers-by, and in pursuing same in high-powered cars, do they—usually?"

"They might," said Thrust. "They might be as apprehensive, and as nervous about strangers in their vicinity, as the Special Branch seem to be, sir."

"Good point, Thrust. They might. Now, just before we call on this particular V.I.P.; I'll quickly run over certain salient facts selected from those you have so kindly given me, placed into relation with certain others you wot not of.

"Cars are of paramount importance, in the countryside, for getting about. We know that Georgette Cumber's car was parked in the chalk-pit, between Gallop Mile and Fosdyke Dyke, on the night of the murder. We know, too, that it was being driven through Heavenridge on the following Monday, the day Thrust arrived, as reported by one of Goodman's blokes. And we know that on the night of the murder there were parked at Gallop Mile, *during* the bridge game, the cars of Ranaldshaw, a Phantom II Rolls-Royce; Sam Smallfield, a big Bentley; Georgette Cumber, a 3½-litre Jaguar; Sir Benet Caulfield, a monstrous great Delaunay-Belville. *After* the bridge-game, all these cars apparently went to their owners' homes, with the exception of Mrs. Cumber's Jaguar, which was observed parked near to Fosdyke Dyke on the roadside. At about half past ten. I draw a decent veil over the interval between that hour and 8.30 the next morning, when Mrs. Cumber says she found her car exactly where she had left it—as far as she could tell. So much for cars.

"Now, persons. All the persons in the story, you might say, can account for all their movements from Friday lunch-time until after the bomb-throwing in the chalk-pit. We know quite certainly where everybody was at the time of the small forest fire at Gallop Mile. At the operative times when, as far as we can narrow it down, the aspirin bottle—the full one—was available at the Berkeley Square offices for tampering with, Sam Smallfield was at home at Heavenridge, so was Sir Benet, so was J.F.F., so was Georgette, and so was Ann Cumber. John Cumber, this chap Mortenson, and Arnold Winterset were at Berkeley Square. At the calculated time of the old man's death in his bed (*subsequent* to which, we must assume, someone *changed*

the bottle by his bedside, and probably planted the will and pinched the valuables) Smallfield was at home; Arnold was in or around the chalk-pit, on duty; Ann was in bed at Gallop Mile; J.F.F. was at home; and Georgette just must be assumed to have been with him, whether in bed or not; Sir Benet and Lady Caulfield were at home; John Cumber was in the chalk-pit, and past caring. *Where was Mortenson?* Eh? And, at the time when that bomb was chucked at us, on Monday, J.F.F. and Smallfield were chatting together in the middle of a damn' great meadow, Georgette was having her hair set, or whatever you call it, in Heavenridge, Ann was riding with Tom Clarke, and Sir Benet was telephoning at preposterous length, and an expense he could ill afford, to the War Office—something in the paper, about the Normandy battle, had upset him. *Where was Mortenson?* Finally, when John Cumber's dead body was brought back to Acorns—pretty obviously with the idea of planting it at his home and making the police believe he'd committed suicide—Arnold was already outside the house with me, Georgette and Ann and J.F.F. were already inside the house, Smallfield was in bed, and Caulfield was calling on J.F.F. at Fosdyke Dyke. *Where was Mortenson?*"

"Well, where was Mortenson when someone biffed you and Mr. Winterset on the back of the bean—or beans?" demanded Thrust.

"I could bear to know, cock," said the baronet, slowing as a red-and-white house came in view, standing high and back from the road, on the right, opposite a little white gate set in a hawthorn hedge.

"All this is interesting, but only summarizes the facts I read out to you," continued Thrust. "What are the new facts you were going to place in relation to it?"

"The fact that this Mortenson, who looked like the hardest kind of a dead-pan crook, to me, looks like that because he wears, on instructions from the Special Branch, a permanent make-up, for purposes of disguise. Williamshaw says he's none other than Michel, the pre-war big-time smuggling brain. The chemistry stuff is a Scotland Yard double bluff. He's done a first-class war job, going back and forth into occupied Europe just as he likes. It's absolutely imperative that no German agent ever spots him, as Michel, in Britain. They fixed up this country retreat for him at Limpsland, and he wears an over-all mask pulled right down over his face and neck, carrying hair and every-

thing. I noticed that his lips hardly seemed to move when he spoke, and that his eyes looked like slits. It seems that not even you, Thrust, will stand much of a chance of interviewing Mr. Mortenson without a Special Branch introduction. And"—they turned in at the gates of the red-and-white house and climbed a steeply rising concrete path up from the road—"that's why even Williamshaw hasn't ever seen Mr. Mortenson—*without his make-up . . .*"

He braked the Mercédès in front of an imposing, chalet-like residence of red brick faced with white concrete. Curtains blew at the open windows. Geraniums hung in brilliant scarlet clusters from wire baskets over the recessed porch. Everything was tidy, clean, prosperous and silent, as the revolutions of the car's engine ceased at the touch of a switch. Thrust rubbed his formidable chin.

"No," he said. "No. But *I* have. *I*'ve seen Michel, plenty of times. He used to be in active business as a big-scale smuggler, with blackmail as a sideline. Quite a little reunion, you might say."

CHAPTER VII

"Oh . . . vy worn't there a *Alleybi*?"

—MR. WELLER.

"THE grave," remarked Conway, "is a fine and private place—like this."

Thrust got out of the Mercédès by the near-side door, and joined the barrister, Ann and Arnold in front of the porch. It was still, with the blessed stillness of deep countryside places in the fullness of approaching evening. Only the gentle wind, odorous with the south, playing about the muslin of the curtains at the open windows, made any sound audible above the ordinary tones of talk.

"It's a fine place all right," said Thrust, accepting Conway's quotation perfectly literally, "and reasonably private, I suppose. But why should it be like a grave, sir?"

They all looked up at the big house. . . .

"Dunno. Just a thought I had. What do we do now? Ring? Knock? What are the conventions governing the social side of the lives of master spies? I wouldn't know. Perhaps we have to whistle a prearranged tune. And have we a password?"

"Nothing like that necessary, sir," said Thrust with great cheerfulness, and lifted his hand to a button encircled in white stone, with the word BELL carved upon it.

"One minute, sir," said a new, sharp voice. They turned. A blue-helmeted head was staring at them from the corner of the house to their right, where the concrete runway from the gates swept round in a curve towards what looked like a back garden.

"Williamshaw was right," murmured Conway, "so far. Let's just see if he'll accept our *bona-fides*. Out with your documents, men, and board!"

The police constable came towards them with that dignified, slow stride which asserts by its unhurried confidence the authority and sanctions of the Law. He stopped, a few yards away, looking at them each in turn, with a level, scrutinizing, and curiously impersonal look. Thrust stood quite still, then spoke the immemorial words with which, in the darkness and silence of the night, on lonely London beats, the plain-clothes man almost always

makes himself known to the uniformed man, low-voiced and very slightly patronizing. . . .

"Everything all right?"

The policeman was evidently surprised, but he showed it only momentarily, by a slight flicker of his level stare.

"Were you wanting anybody in particular, sir?" he asked.

"We came here to see a Mr. Mortenson."

"What name, sir?" asked the policeman, civilly.

"Detective-Inspector Thrust, C.I.D. And this gentleman is Sir Brian Conway, K.C., from the Special Branch."

"Just so, sir. You won't mind if I ask you for your papers, sir? Orders from the Special Branch."

"Quite right," said Thrust, and took out his wallet. Conway did the same. They handed their passes to the constable, who examined them with the greatest particularity, even a careful comparison of the features of Thrust and Conway with those depicted on the tiny photographs gummed into place on the identity cards.

"Well, sir," said the constable, this ritual done, "I shall have to ask you your business with Mr. Mortenson"—and he seemed to wait with an air of expectancy that reminded Arnold of the expression on the face of a highly trained dog when he has performed the first half of a clever trick, and the next move is obviously with his master. Equally obviously, in this case, and almost ludicrously, Thrust was aware of the significant pause, and had not the least idea how to proceed.

"I suppose," said Conway, "we're expected to give you a password now? Well, of course, we can't. But this is a police matter of some urgency. We must have the quickest possible access to Mr. Mortenson, please."

"Some questions arising in connection with these murders," added Thrust, most unfortunately. The constable stiffened. Mere murders, quite obviously, were as nothing to him by comparison with the weighty affairs of state with which, as had been all too thoroughly inculcated in his consciousness by his superiors, he was now intimately concerned. The routine functions of the police, even the hierarchy of police, now commanded his lesser loyalty. Characteristically, Conway admired him for this, while Thrust, frustrated and slightly piqued at the scouting of his authority, resented it.

"I don't think I can do anything, sir," said the constable, "without the proper procedure."

"Come, come," said Thrust. "No nonsense, my man. Where is Mr. Mortenson?"

"One moment, sir," said the policeman, and walked away very slowly and deliberately, round the corner of the house whence he had come.

"Blast!" said Thrust, crimson to the ears.

Conway laughed.

"He's right, you know, Thrust. Many's the awkward situation would have been avoided when you and I were on Special Branch work with Williamshaw if ordinary coppers had had the damned sense to stick to the letter of their instructions, instead of being impressed with the apparent importance of persons who were concerned to subvert our orders. After all, there's no reason, on the face of it, why we *should* talk to this Mortenson, unless we've been given the password. Is there?"

"Suppose not," grumbled Thrust. "But every minute may count. We may be too late, through this delay."

"Then we ought to have started sooner, as the constable said to the legal gentleman acting for that Cabinet Minister who tried to go the wrong way round Parliament Square just because he was late for a meeting of His Majesty's Most Honourable Privy Council. First things first, Thrust. There's a war on—and Williamshaw has no doubt given these orders for reasons which he believes to be good and sufficient."

"Good evening, Inspector! Good evening, Sir Brian! Good evening, miss! Good evening, Mr. Winterset!" cried the cheerful voice of Inspector Goodman, only faintly overlaid with clicking sounds, as he advanced up the concrete drive-in from the road, pushing his bicycle.

"Oh, Inspector," cried Ann, "do tell me—why do you always have to ride around on a bicycle? I thought inspectors had fast cars always at their command, like Inspector Thrust."

"Yes, miss, they do so," said Goodman, clicking madly. "But I like to keep fit—and then, my boy he's on an oil tanker, bringing petrol from the States. You only have to hear once what it's like when one of those things gets a direct hit—and you're pretty keen on saving petrol, miss. They just go up! *Whoosh!* . . . and they've had it. Now, Inspector, and Sir Brian—I understand we're to interrogate this Mr. Mortenson. I've got a warrant, and everything is in proper order."

"Have you, be japers!" exclaimed Conway in high delight. "Now we shall at last find out what happens when an irresistible

force meets an immovable object. A warrant, my pretties, is as formidable an instrument as the State, in its power and majesty, has devised. I bet Williamshaw hasn't thought of a counter to this one. We'll read it out to the copper. 'George, by the Grace of God, King, Defender of the Faith, etc.' Here he comes. Inspector, to the battle and the toil . . ."

The serious face of the police constable appeared again round the corner of the house. He saluted Goodman's superior uniform, not perfunctorily but gravely and seriously, and addressed himself to Thrust.

"I'm very sorry, sir, but you can't see Mr. Mortenson. Those are my orders, sir."

"Do you know," demanded Goodman, in awful tones, and with a sudden lapse into the grammar of his younger days, "who you're a-speaking to, Constable? This is Sir Brian Conway, K.C."

"I can't help it if he's the King of England, sir," said the constable. "Them's my orders, sir."

"I have a message, here, from the King of England," said Goodman ominously. "Please to read it, Constable."

He flourished the thick, blue, familiar folded paper under the white-faced policeman's nose. He took it from Goodman's trembling fingers, opened it, and scanned it. At sight of the name inscribed in the appropriate place by the flowing penmanship of the aged clerk to the Justices at Heavenridge, he gasped sharply, and looked up; his jaw hardened as he met the glances of those strangers, bent upon him pityingly, sternly, irately, indifferently, and excitedly, as befitted their various reactions to the situation in which he found himself.

"Well, sir," he said carefully, "I must act, on this yurr document. I must, I can see that. But how, sir? I can tell you that, too. I places myself under your orders, and refers you to my superior orf'cers, sir. After that," he added gloomily, "I spacks I resigns. Save myself from being pushed."

"Here's the Superintendent," said Thrust.

Williamshaw, in a dark tweed suit, hatless, sat well back in his seat beside the uniformed driver of a 100-mile-an-hour police Lagonda which had surged up the concrete almost silently; his long black hair was a little wind-blown; his deeply sunk dark eyes stared out from his cadaverous face with the mournful expression of a Great Dane.

Thrust, Goodman and the constable stood as if to attention.

"Trouble, Thrust?" asked Williamshaw.

"No, sir," said Thrust, gulping. "No trouble at all. We just came up to see this Mr. Mortenson. We were just asking the constable here if we could—see him, sir."

"Yes. About this case you're on, I hear? You know who he is?"

"Yes, sir. I've had a good deal to do with the gentleman, when I was on the Dover run, before the war. Then, he was reckoned to be just about the cleverest scoun—I mean, sir, one of the ablest men in the—business, sir."

They walked to the porch again, after Conway had introduced all present to the superintendent, and Thrust once again put forth his hand to the bell by the side of the front door. They heard the long, continuing peal, inside the house. No other sound succeeded it . . . during two, during three minutes in which they all waited with the consequential air of pilgrims from a far land, arrived at last before the gates of a sacred and longed-for shrine. . . .

"I think, sir," said the serious constable, "that we ought to go round the back. We have a sort of G.H.Q., round there, you might call it—in the green'us and garden shed. There's always some of us on duty at the house, you see, and we work in shifts, like."

"Take us," said Williamshaw.

They went. Round the corner of the house was a spacious garage, and beyond that, a two-acre garden bright with flowers, and a vegetable plot excellently looked after, and beyond again, an orchard. Surveying all this, Conway touched the constable's elbow.

"Who looks after the vegetables?" he asked. "Is there a staff at the house?"

"No, sir—no staff," said he. "We work in the garden, to pass the time away. We've all got bits of ground, in these parts—and it gets awful dull, this job, for weeks at a stretch. There's a Mrs. Plummet comes up from the village, every day, to do the inside of the house. But she has to keep out of the rooms Mr. Mortenson is actually using when he's at home."

"He's often away?" asked Conway, idly—not because he wanted to know, but because he liked the constable and wanted to be friendly as some slight recompense for the discomfort the man had been caused. But the answer made him very thoughtful.

"Tell you the truth, sir, although we're always on the watch, as you might say, we never rightly know his comings and goings.

We seldom see him come, somehow—though there's three of us always about. Or go."

Williamshaw was talking to a burly sergeant. He turned to the baronet.

"It doesn't seem as if Mr. Mortenson is at home, Sir Brian," he said.

"How does the sergeant know?" asked Conway, quickly.

"Well, sir," boomed that officer, "we've seen naught of 'im, since this morning early. Some of us met him out towards the Heavenridge road a piece, quite early on, when we was on a job. 'E came back 'ere, we understood, but we 'aven't seen 'im about, not all day. 'E's like that, sir. Very secret-like, coming and going."

"That's entirely understandable," Williamshaw said. "Indeed, it's one part of the plan. Arrangements have been made whereby he could leave the house, if he wished, in almost perfect secrecy."

"Such as?"

"Such as by leaving the orchard through a concealed wicket-gate giving access to a haulier's yard, beyond, where he could pick up a truck. They have trucks going in and out at all hours. Another way was by a grocer's van which came up to the side of the house, out of sight of the road, so that he could ride away in it."

"I see. Then quite obviously we shall have some difficulty in checking his departure. One thing more. Was he due to leave on business at about this time? Within the last week or two, for instance?"

"No, he wasn't. But I must emphasize that he was a free agent in many ways, and had authority to act on his own initiative if he had reason to suppose that his *incognito* was compromised. That was essential."

"Yes. Well, we'd better go into the house, don't you think?"

They went into the house. An agile constable entered one of the open upper windows, descended the stairs, and let them all in at the front door, which was double-bolted on the inside. They found a spacious, modern dwelling, furnished and decorated in the best of Continental taste.

Under the capable and quiet-voiced direction of Williamshaw the party of four policemen, aided by Ann, Arnold and Conway, began a very thorough scrutiny of the entire premises. Everything was scrupulously clean and tidy, with an air of being unused which open windows, some fresh food in the larder, and up-to-date newspapers neatly ranged in a rack, did little to dispel.

"I think," said the superintendent, "that I'll ask one of the constables to cycle down to Mrs. Plummet and request her to come and see me."

Arnold had seated himself at a vast, flat-topped desk in a room lined with books. He gave a little sigh of satisfaction at the appurtenances of that kind of activity to which he was so well accustomed, and which he so greatly loved, set out before him now with an elegant efficiency, and a plenitude richly rejoicing to his accountant's heart . . . the filing cabinets, the card indices, the loose-leaf books!

"Leave me here. Let me cope with all this," he murmured, putting on spectacles. Arnold went to work, quietly and methodically. Certain account-books engaged his close attention. Of names there were very few, since letters and numbers had been used instead, but the movements of money have always a beautiful rhythm, flowing to an understandable pattern perfectly comprehensible to initiates of the craft, without the necessity for names. And one name, that of a finance house in a South American republic, was familiar to Arnold. With some stir of excitement, he beheld the elaborate evolutions recorded before him of a class of transaction which he knew to be legal, but only just legal; there were dates, and there were totals. He made brief calculations on a slip of paper, and looked round to see Sir Brian wandering into the room with a distraught air, his hands in his pockets, and a very large briar pipe between his teeth.

"My pondering machine," said Conway, taking the pipe out and looking lovingly at its even-glowing bowl. "I'm puzzled, Arnold, old cock. There's summat wrong with this house. I wish I knew just what it is. I'm too old to start believing in auras."

"There's something rather peculiar here," said Arnold.

"There is? Bless you for those words. Something peculiar is what I'd like to see. Everything so far seems too normal to be true. What is it? Can I understand it? Say it very slowly, and in little, simple words. Figures terrify me."

"Sit down," said Arnold, with quiet authority. After a moment he went on: "You know, if a man wanted to get a large sum of money out of the country, at the present time, he'd find it very difficult. But it *can* be done. In simplified form, this is how: you dispose of property in this country, or make cash funds available, to a national of a neutral state here on war-supply transactions. This bloke, now, owes you, say, £50,000. His firm—say in Latin America—then purchases crops of coffee and sugar to that extent,

and disposes of these, through normal trading channels, in the United States. The Latin American firm then has, on your account, in Latin America, dollars to the value of £50,000. With these they can purchase stock in the United States, or property, which can again be sold, in the States, for a dollar credit. Then you go to the States, say on Government business, and this credit is made available to you. See?"

"Yes, I think so . . . doesn't it cost you rather a piece of money to do it?"

"Not likely! They do it for nothing. You are financing their deals. They don't pass you the *profit* on the deals. So they're very pleased to hand you over the equivalent sum in dollars."

"Right. Go on. . . ."

"Well, there's a record of just such a transaction here. The name of the firm who handle it is written down. The amount is fifty thousand quid. And I'm almost certain that that was the amount, in cash and securities, which old Mr. Ranaldshaw had in his bedroom safe."

"How would you know?"

"I've told you," said Arnold, patiently, "that I had a lot to do with the old man's personal and private transactions. I had a fair idea, nearly all the time, just how he was operating. And of course I handled a good deal of the routine work. I knew that he had somewhere—and the Gables was the likeliest place—around and about £50,000 in—er—in fluid resources."

"Like cash, it might be—and securities?"

"Like cash, and securities of a kind. They'd be quickly negotiable paper."

"You know," drawled Conway, "this is the first kind of real evidence we've had that this fifty thousand ever really existed. We saw a reference to it in a death-note, yes—but we came to the conclusion on pretty good evidence that said note was a forgery. Owing to the old man not having the wherewithal to write it, not in that bedroom. Now, if the note was a forgery, why did the forger *mention* the cash and securities in the safe?"

"No idea," said Arnold, impatiently. Conway looked at his pipe. "The thing that interests me," Arnold went on, "is the evidence here before my eyes that someone has been juggling £50,000 into \$200,000. Near enough—the pound's pegged at about 4.03. Surely that argues clearly enough that someone in this house had £50,000 in fluid money, no longer ago than the day before yesterday?"

"P'raps," said the barrister. "The evidence may be forged. You must admit there's a strong suspicion that it is. In plain logic, I mean. Otherwise the coincidence between a *forged* reference in the old man's note, and a reference to an identical sum of money now found to have been negotiated in this house, just isn't a coincidence."

"Yes it is," said Arnold, stoutly. "It's the best kind of a coincidence. It argues a *connection*."

"True!" exclaimed Conway, with highly typical willingness to be convicted out of his own verbosity. "True! There's no getting away from that . . . whether the reference in the letter was bogus, and this evidence you have found is bogus, too—or whether either of the references is real and true—or whether both are—there *is* relevance in the twin pieces of evidence. And, after all, we only think the *note* was bogus. Nobody has suggested that the £50,000 was bogus, as well. Why, this gives us the solution to the bally mystery, surely? Make a note, in understandable terms, of this discovery of yours, for Williamshaw. Give him chapter, verse, and line . . . I know now what to look for in this house. And where's that Mrs. Plummet?"

Conway rushed from the room, regarded by Arnold, steadily but with no change of facial expression, through the twin lenses perched before his dark eyes. The secretary of Ranaldshaws made no move to carry out Sir Brian's request. He gently adjusted his spectacles and went on with his methodical overhaul of the entire contents of the big desk. After five minutes he opened a thin folder, one of scores stacked in drawers sliding on runners, and stared for a long minute more at a single sheet of flimsy paper lying in it. He rose at once, holding the folder like a tray, carefully not touching that shocking and compromising sheet of paper bearing eight or ten lines of carbon-copied typing, and carried it to Williamshaw, who was sunk in the profound deeps of an immense armchair and was listening to a brisk Kentish-fire of reminiscence poured out by a buxom woman of fifty, rustling in good black silk, who had perched herself respectfully on the very edge of a dining-chair, and twirled madly between her fingers the strap of a black handbag on her lap. Conway lay full-length on a divan, smoking and, perforce, listening. . . .

"Not a 'ide or a 'air of 'im 'ave I seen, that day to this. 'E's *bin* 'ere, that's certain; but my instructions was—an' well paid I was to 'eed 'em, which I 'ave, to this very day—take no notice of 'is funny ways, do what you're paid to do, and mind your

own business. Which I 'ave, to the letter. I've swept, an' I've washed, an' I've washed up an' cleaned down an' kep' the place a fair picture, as you only needs to look about you, sir, to see I 'ave. But 'ide or 'air of Mr. Mortenson I 'ave not seen, nor wanted to, since 'e told me to get in no more food, cancel the milk an' the bread, an' do no more cookin' for 'im, sir."

The telephone on a table by a wall purred softly, saying *sorry to interrupt you, but . . .* Williamshaw ignored this decorous appeal. A large constable entered the room with elephantine and exaggerated quiet, and lifted the receiver.

"Yard, sir," he remarked timidly. Williamshaw made a long arm behind him and was handed the receiver. (How like the old devil, thought Conway, to have noticed the length of that flex.)

"Open it, and read it," said Williamshaw to the telephone. . . . It was getting quite dark in the drawing-room. Conway sat up, knocked out the ashes from his pipe, rose and wandered to the windows; pulled the curtains across them, and went to the door; he clicked on bright soft electric light, and stood by Arnold's side watching patiently the long, pale bony face of the superintendent; his eyes dropped; when he recognized the paper Arnold was still holding before him, flat on the open folder, like a votive offering, he drew in his breath quickly, and left the room. Williamshaw remained sunk in his chair, the telephone receiver held to the side of his head. Arnold remained where he was, a yard or two inside the room. Williamshaw said "Thank you," and handed back the instrument to the large constable. He noticed Arnold, and raised an interrogative eyebrow.

"This is a carbon copy," said Arnold, "of a typed description of me, and the whereabouts of my Home Guard platoon's H.Q., which was found on that man Gasher Gibbs."

"Yes," said the superintendent, "it seems to have been referred to, in a letter delivered to the Yard, addressed to me, from Mr. Mortenson. It seems he has left the country."

"For the United States of America?" asked Conway's voice, behind Arnold. Williamshaw nodded. "A—confession?" asked Conway. Williamshaw seemed to muse.

"You might call it a confession, yes," he said at last. "They are sending the actual document down to me."

"We've got to find him, John," said Conway quietly. Williamshaw shook his head.

"You must understand that Mr. Mortenson is—privileged," he said.

Conway shook his head, smiling faintly.

"And I—not for the first time, John, I assure you—I just ask—*where is Mortenson?* Only now, I'm asking it with real fear, for you, John. Do you understand?"

"I think I begin to understand, yes. But have we any evidence that it is necessary?"

"Brother, we have. Come with me. . . ."

And Conway marched upstairs to the bathroom, followed by the superintendent.

"The bathroom," said the baronet, "as any really womanly woman will testify, is one part of any house where a man most surely leaves traces of his constant presence. Men are like that. Perhaps it's because the bathroom is functional . . . it's the nearest thing to a workshop. It's a place where massive work is done, as the poet said of London, England. . . ."

"Enter, and look around you. I shall sit here, on the edge of this bath, on and off, for hours and hours, until the truth which is shouted at me in this room speaks also to you."

Superintendent Williamshaw examined the bathroom with great attention. It was tiled from floor to lofty ceiling in tiles of the palest shade of turquoise, giving effects of coolness and quiet, like the waters of a tropical lagoon. . . . There was a turquoise-tiled bath, immaculately clean from the zealous attentions of Mrs. Plummet; there was a turquoise-tiled wash-stand and a glass-walled shower; there was a tall enamelled cupboard in a matching colour and a similiar small metal cupboard, with a mirror front. The tiled window-ledge was bare except for a very fine set of six open-edge razors in a redolent Russian-leather case, plush-lined, a pot of brushless shaving-cream, and a tube of toothpaste, half used. In the small cupboard was stored a magnificent display of unguents and powders and detergents in peacetime Parisian profusion, all very odorous and nice. A turquoise-hued bathrobe hung in the tall enamelled cupboard, together with a great wealth of thick and voluptuous towels.

Upon all these things, *seriatim*, Williamshaw bestowed the tribute of a narrow and jealous scrutiny—the kind of thoughtful and concentrated examination which a trained observer applies to the mounting, monumental detail lying beneath all his successful work.

"Impersonation, you think?" he said at last, looking at Conway.

"Could any mortal thing be *easier*? The man was officially

disguised, with a disguise which anyone else could just as conveniently have adopted—and *nobody a whit the wiser*. Do you know, John, that this may, at long last, prove to be the perfect murder? The necessary conditions for that consummation, so devoutly wished by so many persons in this world of base passions, have been created for a murderer *by the police*. Irony! I hope I'm wrong. I hope so. But I dare not think I am. Look at the cupboards. These are a Frenchman's things. Don't ask me how he got 'em, in this year of grace 1944, when the island bastion, England, is deprived of damn' near every article of luxury any man of even moderately expensive tastes can remember. I never met Jean Georges Michel—nor did you—but I've heard of him, and my guess is, if that guy wanted anything whatever and was able to go where it grew, he would be able to bring it back with him. Against all the arrayed forces of your boasted legions, in peacetime! But in wartime, with the status of a King's Messenger, almost—ships of the Royal Navy standing in to pipe him aboard an' all—why, it was a piece of cake. So, Jean Georges Michel—Mr. Mortenson, to the Foreign Office and the Special Branch—is obviously the man who brought these things hither. And he's supposed to have been living in this house for two months, lyin' low, an' sayin' nuffin'. That's been his rôle, lately, you tell me—on your instructions? Yes—well he hasn't, John. He hasn't *been* around. He hasn't shaved here every day, and bathed here every day, and brushed his hair—What colour was his hair?"

He rushed to the bathroom door and bellowed for Thrust. That energetic detective-inspector's face appeared at the half-way point on the stairs, greatly apprehensive. To Conway's question he returned a steady stare, champing his great jaws.

Then: "He was as black as night, Sir Brian," he said. "I never saw a darker man. Blue, you'd say, where he shaved. You know how some of these Frenchmen are. And black hair—blacker than yours. Black like a Latin, sir."

"Thank you," said Conway, returning to Williamshaw.

Together they examined combs and hair-brushes, shaving-creams and razors.

"You see," said Conway. "Black hairs on the brushes, clinging to traces of this delicately perfumed oil. But not recent—there's dust on 'em. Here's the bottle of oil. Do you know it? You wouldn't, I suppose, you being a Puritan. It's made by De la Renier. (Wonder if he's selling it to the *Haupttreichswehr-kommand* in that little shop under the plane trees, nowadays.)

Examine the fine layer of dust over the bottle. Remember the Army truck depot, beyond the orchard, so conveniently placed for Mortenson to make his secret getaways. Dust! Even in Kent. The bathroom overlooks the back garden. The best of housekeepers and lady helps don't rub up their gentlemen's bottles and jars. Eh? Probably they pretend not to notice 'em."

"Has Thrust brought his usual impedimenta, do you know?" asked Williamshaw.

"He has. In the car. You think we ought to go over the place for prints?"

"I do, Sir Brian. There's enough evidence here to justify us in spending time finding out all we possibly can about the movements of Mr. Mortenson. . . ."

. . . Considerable activity ensued. Thrust went about the premises with that paraphernalia of dust-blower, envelopes and magnifying lenses which had provoked Dr. Heavibody's sarcasm at Goodman's expense; cameras also came from his bag in the car, and flashlight bulbs spluttered their bright accompaniment to his tour of the house. Conway operated an extraordinary mechanism with twin lenses and a fitted electric light.

"The thot," he said, "plickens, as the excited actor put it. I told you my pal Arnold has impressive evidence of the negotiation in terms of dollar exchange, via parties known to him by repute in the famous city of Buenos Aires, of fifty thousand smackers. Supposing said transaction proves to be concerned with the cash and kind alleged to be missing from old Ranaldshaw's safe? Ha! I thought so—I thought I could! How this would please Heavibody, coroner and medicine-man of an adjoining parish; regular Sherlock Holmes routine, brought slightly up to date. John, there's not a fingerprint in this house less than a fortnight old, save those we have made-ourselves. See this jar of brushless cream—my prize exhibit from the window-ledge. Even Mrs. Plummet, let us be thankful for it, don't go a-dustin' of pots of shaving-cream. The dust, my old, overlies the prints, and the prints are Mortenson's. But Thrust tells us there are no prints at all on the carbon-copy Arnold found . . . nor on the ledger entries relating to this certain man who went to Buenos Ayres."

"Dear me, Sir Brian," said Williamshaw mildly, "the implication of your remarks is surely that Mr. Mortenson is an accessory to the fact of attempted murder. The attempted murder of Mr. Winterset and perhaps of yourself, and the actual murder of Mr.

Ranaldshaw, and perhaps of his nephew. But if this implication has any basis, then perfectly obviously there won't be any traces of his prints found on the pieces of evidence upon which it depends. The man isn't a fool."

"No. That's just it, John. There you have it. He's not a fool. He don't leave his sign-manual on the evidence. *But he do leave the evidence itself. Why?*"

Williamshaw made no answer.

"There are only two reasonable explanations, John. One is that Mortenson had nothing whatever to do with the typed note and the dealings in foreign money. The other is that he was responsible for both, and left the evidence of that responsibility for you to find, in order to close the investigation into the Heavenridge murders. I take it that the second explanation is supported by his letter to you at the Yard? And that letter, after dotting i's and crossing t's and underlining and italicizing and generally emphasizing the obvious, rounds all neatly off by explaining that he's gone to New York to collect the boodle, and that there isn't one little thing you can do about it—or else?"

Williamshaw nodded.

"He says he's gone," he observed, "by route K. I don't know how route K works. I rather doubt if a mere superintendent, merely in the interests of civil justice, could possibly find out."

"Oh, but of course! It's too easy, too easy! We're left with the bodies and the blame, and Military Necessity, that enormous, portentous, unquestionable, spurious screen for every sort of incompetence and malversation, that phoney sphinx, that last bastion behind which the politicians' ineptitude, the warriors' folly, and the civil servants' criminal negligence find final sanctuary, is invoked to stifle enquiry, baffle pursuit, dam the stream of justice, destroy faith, sap the foundations of society and create the greatest alibi in the whole history of recorded crime!"

"Really, Sir Brian, there are times when one is almost provoked into reminding you that you are in England, now . . . this Celtic overstatement . . . really. . . . I don't know," Superintendent Williamshaw went on with increasing animation, "which of your two reasonable explanations is correct. My real interest in Thrust's case lay only in safeguarding the identity of an important servant of the nation. I am still very much concerned to do so. It is almost as serious, to me, that Mortenson has abandoned the tasks which were entrusted to him, as it is to you that he is a

murderer, or a suspected murderer. The important thing, therefore, is still——”

“*To find Mortenson*,” said Conway, “dead or alive.”

“Ah,” murmured Williamshaw, after a short pause, “I see what you are getting at now. Forgive me, Sir Brian. My brain has simply not been geared to your problem—it’s been meshed too closely with my own. I can see that both problems might be susceptible of the same solution. You are perfectly right, we must find Mortenson. Nothing else is for the moment quite as important as that, and I think I can promise that not inconsiderable power will be put at our disposal to that end. We must begin at the beginning. We must go over the whole of your murder case thoroughly.”

Outside the room, from the rich blue night that overlaid all the scented garden, came the unmistakable hoarse voice of a revolver shot, answered immediately and persistently, first by a clatter of echoes and then by the crisper, staccato utterance of sustained, aimed rifle-fire.

“Ring up the curtain,” said Conway, jumping for the light-switch by the door, while the superintendent, crouching, reached for the tightly drawn black-out of shimmering, turquoise-hued rubberized fabric over the bathroom window.

CHAPTER VIII

*"Hasn't a doubt—zample—far better hang wrong
f'ler than no f'ler."*

—THE DEBILITATED COUSIN.

THERE was no moon, but a mighty multitude of stars crowded the firmament with an effect of closely roofing-in the dark world. Vicious sprinkles of red light palpitated on the blackness, low down in the direction of the orchard, and the two men leaning from the upper window heard distinctly the almost plaintive song of the receding bullets whimpering downwind; vague shouts came back against the faintly stirring night-breeze.

"Is that you, sir?" called Thrust's voice, immediately below them.

"Yes. What is it?" asked Williamshaw.

"They spotted someone trying to get up to the house, and waited for him to come on. They waited a bit too long. He must have seen one of 'em, and he let fly at once, then broke away under the apple trees. The chaps started shooting straight away—those being your instructions, sir, it seems." Thrust managed to sound slightly disapproving about this breach by the Special Branch of the sound English doctrine that the police should not be armed—least of all with rifles. "I don't think they've got him, sir."

The angry stammer of a heavy motor sounded from some hundred yards away.

"Hell," said Conway, "that's the truck he came in . . . I wonder if he can be caught . . ." and he vanished from Williamshaw's side; he found the bathroom door, gained the landing, went downstairs in two fantastic leaps, made for the front door, and felt the cool air blowing again on his face as he fled across the concrete towards the cars parked in front of the house. Great lamps blazed wantonly out, throwing white beams over the lawn.

"This way," called Arnold Winterset. "They've parked the police Lagonda in front of the Merc. And it's got headlights like in peacetime. Can you drive it? I was trying to get it out of your way——"

"Move over, and make room for M'sieu X," panted Conway, heaving himself into the driving-seat of the open car, and groping for the dashboard light-switch. "I *have* driven the things. They'll do any single thing that any other car could do, on the roads we shall travel this night. The fool has made a mistake at last. They all do, of course."

"Sir Brian!" called Williamshaw from the porch, "please take care. I don't think you can possibly catch him, with the start he's got. Remember he's armed."

"I've only got to press him closely enough!" screamed Conway above the blast of the exhaust, as he backed and turned. "If he's one of our suspects, he has a rendezvous tomorrow that I must try and make him miss. Warn all stations, John . . ."

"Right, sir!" roared Thrust, racing forward at top speed to try and make himself heard as the tourer dipped down the ramp towards the road. Conway laughed when, faintly, they caught his parting words. "There's a gun in the near-side pocket, sir . . ."

"How the devil do we get to the road running at the back of the house?" demanded the baronet as they howled into Limpsland village, shut and sleeping, lightless as a tomb.

"Fork sharp right when you see a big elm in the middle of the road," replied Ann Cumber, from somewhere in the rear seats.

"Ann! You ought not to be in on this!" exclaimed Conway.

"I ought so," she said. "Aren't I learning to drive? This is where I learn."

"And how nice," observed Arnold, after they had cornered with a short scream of struggling tyres round a looming blackness of burdened elm branches, "to be chasing someone, at last! After all, we've been hounded from parish to parish around these parts ever since Sunday morning. We seem always to have been running away, up till now. I feel much safer, doing the pursuing. At least we have the choice of weapons, and of when to start shooting. What do you mean by saying he's made a mistake? Or she? I take it you think this is the murderer?"

"Yes. And he's no she. You can get away with a lot of things, when impersonating others, but you can't get away with a woman's hips in a man's suit. Not with Mrs. Plummet you can't, anyway. Reason he's made a mistake is that everyone on the list of suspects—every single one, mind you—has an assignation to see Spoof win the Merston Stakes at Merston race-meeting tomorrow. So, we must make it impossible for this bloke to be there. Then we're in the beautiful position of busting his alibi in

advance, as it were. His alibi for not meeting us all at Merston Park, you see . . . where are we now?"

"That's the entrance to the yard where the trucks are kept," said Ann. "He must have started from here."

She was instantly confirmed by the figure of a policeman picked up by the blazing headlights, waving them forward with big, sweeping gestures of his arms. They shot past him and the lights opened up a white valley of straight and empty road for two hundred yards, three, four, five—it ran on seemingly endless, inviting to a surge of superb speed as the throttle-pedal went down to the floorboards.

"If this lasts, we'll get him," said Conway. The little illuminated dial in front of Arnold sustained with equanimity the steady crawl of the needle past 80, flicking onward then in a regulated and almost tremorless series of accurate jumps, their incidence becoming slightly slower, past 90, and 95; then came a bend, and another bend. Conway hurled the low-hung chassis round these with a nice calculation of the minimum deceleration necessary to accomplish each. Bright silver points gleamed ahead.

"The Brighton road?" asked Conway, slowing and slowing.

"The Eastbourne road—London's to the right," said Ann.

The Lagonda slid to a near-standstill, and a policeman came out of a blue telephone kiosk.

"I saw him, sir," he cried, running towards them. "Going like the devil, he was. North, he went. I've warned them at Godstone and Redhill."

"Right. Thank you," sang Conway, and the car jetted forth upon a wide ribbon of excellently surfaced highway . . . they held the centre of this with aplomb and persistence, and the needle pointed with ecstatic little quivers to 101. The long-probing fingers of the spotlight beam, faint but pursuing, picked up after five miles the dim outline of a regulation Army truck—just before the canvas tilt marked with a white star turned off among tall, black pines. For an instant of the time that flies it stood profiled in sharp silver. Then it was gone. Its pursuers hummed their way to the strong song of a mighty engine over the intervening miles of empty black road.

"We shall assume," said Conway, "for no better reason than that we must, that that was *he*. It's our only chance. . . ."

He flung them sideways into the sombre shadows of silent, ranked trees huddling closely the margins of a narrow and

twisting by-road which led them on, cross-hatched with moon shadows and set about, soon, with dim shapes of fences, houses, trees, hedges.

"His average speed," remarked Arnold, "from the start, would be—what would you say? Forty?"

Conway nodded, intent on his task.

"Forty. Yes—and ours seems to be sixtyish. And we were five minutes behind him, at the beginning. Which means, all other things being equal, that we should be up with him after ten miles."

"Arnold! However can you know that?" asked Ann.

Arnold coughed demurely.

"In ten minutes," he said, "at an average speed of sixty, we shall have traversed ten miles. One mile per minute. Right? It will take that truck, at an average speed of forty, fifteen minutes to do the same distance. A minute-and-a-half per mile. Right? But the truck has just five minutes in hand, so we should coincide with him after ten miles. And if that truck really contains the bloke we're after, he'll *leave* it, after ten miles. Whatever other defects he may have, mental or moral, he's not weak on arithmetic . . ."

Conway uttered a strangled sound.

"Eh?" said Arnold, crudely.

"Just the advice I always need," said Conway. "I always go and underestimate the opposition. How far will ten miles take us? Where to, like?"

"To about Redhill, I should say, on this road."

"Yes," said Ann, "and at Redhill, fast electric trains run frequently to London. It says so, in huge and unmistakable characters, white on green, on a board over against the railway-station."

"Uh-huh," said Conway. "And blow me if this doesn't look very like Redhill, right here."

"The police have been warned. Surely they'll stop him—hey! Look out!"

The truck, the identical truck they had been pursuing, or its twin, lay directly in their path, drawn right across the road, broadside to them; a red lantern swung rhythmically to and fro in front of it as they shot forward down the length of an unlighted street. Conway avoided disaster by persuading the Lagonda somehow, and unwillingly, to go backwards and slurringly into a side-street fifteen yards short of the truck, where it knocked

down a lamp-post and ploughed a hole in somebody's front-garden wall before it came to a stop. A policeman was at the side of the car before their dazed senses had entirely recovered a proper equilibrium.

"All right, sir?" he asked cheerfully. "That was a near go, I must say. Them things travel a bit, don't they? I told 'em you'd be comin' up 'ere a fair lick, if so be you come up 'ere at all. They would 'ave it their little ole red light was ample warning. Your friend in that Army truck, 'e mus' 'ave parked it, and done a bunk, sir. We got to the spot as fast as we could after receiving the police message, but 'e'd parked it, and gorn. We was coming to meet 'im, see? Must 'ave bin expecting us, eh? The boys are scouting around after 'im, now. 'E won't get out of Redhill, not very easy, 'e won't, take it from me, sir."

"Won't 'e?" said Conway faintly, and clambered into the road. Ann and Arnold silently followed him along the side-street to the place where the standing truck occupied the whole width of the approach to the town.

"The station?" said Conway, addressing at random a little group of policemen.

"Station's covered, sir," said one of them, saluting in the moonlight. Conway grunted.

"Got a torch?" he next asked. Torches were thrust upon him. "Shine 'em here, on the road," he commanded, and stooped to peer down at the surface all round the truck. He stopped, staring into the tyre-marked dust at the rear of the truck; he squatted on his hams.

"He had a motor-cycle in the truck!" exclaimed Arnold.

"Yes," said the baronet. "I expect it was part of the normal routine, designed to make it absolutely safe for Mortenson when he wanted to get away in a hurry, and secretly. Probably he had a place here in Redhill where he used to leave the truck. A garage, maybe. Then he could leave, perhaps by another exit, on the bike. This is all the wildest surmise, of course. But there doesn't seem any doubt that a bike has been brought down here into the road, out of the truck, and ridden off in the direction of the town. The cops had better be tipped off. . . ."

A policeman hurried away from them, into the night.

"Come on," said Conway, "I don't see what we can do, except check all our pals at Heavenridge, their comings and goings this night. We can still bust the alibi in advance. I expect Williamshaw has started already, with Thrust panting at his heels."

He had turned the battered but unbowed Lagonda, and was nosing her out into the main road, when a motor-cycle policeman roared towards them from Redhill. He skidded to a stop in the dusty moonlight.

"Motor-bike was abandoned at Merstham station approach, sir—within the last few minutes. He must have caught a train leaving Merstham for London."

"Why?" demanded Conway. "Why London?"

"Well, sir, there was a London train within a minute or two of the time they reckon he must have got to the station. Eleven-ten, sir—stopping East Croydon and Victoria only."

"He'd never dare," murmured Conway, "he'd never dare!"

"Why not?" asked Ann.

"Because," said Arnold, "he's no fool. He knows we're pretty close behind him, doesn't he, Sir Brian? If he's the murderer, and if the murderer is one of the Heavenridge suspects, his natural course after leaving the house at Limpsland would have been to get back to Heavenridge, so that he wasn't missing when enquiries began there. The fact that he didn't do so surely means that he knew we might be so close behind him that he wouldn't have time to avoid being spotted. So he aimed to throw us off his track—but it's still essential for him to be back at Heavenridge. Even if he has an apparently unchallengeable reason for not being at home tonight—the very fact that he isn't at home will direct suspicion towards him. In point of fact, our suspicions can be narrowed, now, to precisely those persons who can't *prove* that they weren't at Limpsland this evening."

"S'right, cock," said Conway. "It means that the police cordon should be at Heavenridge, not Redhill. To stop him getting *back* without being noticed. I could bear to speak with John Williamshaw at this hour."

"I can get a message through for you, sir," said the motor-cycle policeman, "if you wanted to forage round at Merstham."

Conway clicked on his dashlight, and briskly wrote a message on a page of the man's notebook; two minutes later the Lagonda was at the centre of the town, and had forked right-hand on the London road for Merstham; police at intervals waved them forward, for Superintendent Williamshaw's words had gone forth into Surrey that night in terms of unambiguous authority.

At the drive-in to Merstham station a familiar knot of dark, standing figures was again illuminated by the twin beams of the car's headlights.

"How near can you get to the time at which this motor-bike was abandoned?" was Conway's first question, and it evoked a murmur of comments from the assembled police. Their joint testimony hardened at last into the qualified statement that it was unlikely to have been before twenty minutes to eleven, and could not have been after five minutes beyond the hour. Conway looked at Arnold.

"H'm," said the arithmetician of the party, his spectacles gleaming in the reflected radiance from the car-lights as he nudged them at the bridge of his nose, "we caught up with the truck at exactly two minutes past eleven. I calculate that he was no more than two minutes ahead of us. I ascertained that the police had found the truck one minute before we arrived. He must have had the very narrowest of margins, you see. His time would have been almost as good as ours, round those bends after we left the main road from which we caught sight of him. Even supposing he was three minutes ahead of us—and I can't see how it could have been more—he must have been here at Merstham no earlier than five past."

"No *earlier*!" exclaimed a burly inspector. "But—Wilkinson, here, says he found this motor-bicycle parked here at five minutes past . . ."

"Yes," remarked Arnold with that awful patience of the man who knows he is right. "What time does Wilkinson say it is now?"

Wilkinson stooped massively, from the waist, winding up with large motions of his arms, casting waving shadows towards the station buildings, a watch which he seemed to keep at the end of many feet of massy silver chain; he consulted its dial in the strong beam of a headlight and pronounced his reading of the hour of night in deep, assured tones.

"You are two minutes and forty seconds slow," said Arnold. "Let's have a look at the station clock, and ask them the times of all the trains that have left since eleven."

They moved forward up the station approach, and piled into the booking-hall, where a grey-headed porter listened to their clamour with closed eyes after the manner of his sect; he made the standard answer which the long years of bitter experience had taught him to be the shortest way of satisfying the importunations of travellers.

"Where're you *for*?" he said.

"Look," said Conway. "We're not for anywhere. Not now. We want information. See all these big, impressive policemen.

They want straight answers to straight questions. Let's begin at the beginning, shall we? What trains have left this station since eleven o'clock tonight?"

"Eleven-ten, to Victoria, running two minutes late. Eleven-six, to Redhill an' Brighton, dead on time."

"Fine. Would you be able to identify many of the people who caught the 11.6?"

"Naw," said the man contemptuously. "Look at the bloomin' blackaht, will yer? Cor stone me, guv'nor, I wouldn't know a single one of 'em again."

"Would a passenger on the 11.6 get a connection at Redhill for Heavenridge?"

"Yus. 'E could. Steam train on the Tonbridge line, leavin' Red'ill 11.18."

"Thanks, pal," said Conway; he pressed a piece of paper into the porter's hand and fled for the car; as his companions climbed aboard he addressed the police inspector.

"Will you please get through as quickly as possible to Superintendent Williamshaw, C.I.D., at Heavenridge?" he cried above the blasts of unsilenced exhaust noise. "Tell him the man we want is on the 11.18 from Redhill."

A moment later they were out on the main road.

"The time," said Arnold, "is twenty-two minutes after eleven. Supposing that steam train left Redhill on time, which is unlikely in view of the last-minute rush of Service people scrambling back on late passes, it left only four minutes ago." He looked at his watch. "Four and a half minutes ago. If our bloke really is aboard, we've got him. I take it you are going back to Heavenridge, lickety-spit?"

"Lickety-spit, as ever was," grunted Conway, forking left in the middle of Redhill town, against the red lights that glimmered their tiny crosses in the darkness. They climbed steadily an up-land road to the east. "What's that, down there on the left?"

"The puffer-train in question. Yes! Must be. She's just pulling up for her first stop. You know, at this rate, we could just about contrive to get aboard ourselves, at Godstone."

"No point," said Ann.

"Suppose *he* gets out at Godstone?" said Conway, as the humming car swept among woods and over a hilltop which hid from their view the faintly lit station in the valley below them and the sudden dim patches of yellow light as carriage doors opened all along the dark bulk of the standing train.

"He's still got to get back to the parish of Heavenridge," said Arnold. "He's still got to get home. And surely the Superintendent will be watching all their homes? Surely he's found out, by now, which of 'em is missing?"

"Whose homes? Which of who?" demanded Ann.

"Which of the list of suspects . . . and that includes us, I suppose. Or do we have an alibi?"

Conway made no reply; there is an art of fast driving, the exercise of which demands a concentration of the faculties not less than that involved in other arts; he drove very fast, on a tortuous road that was narrow, poorly surfaced and criss-crossed frequently by roads driving north and south, and at length turned the Lagonda's blunt, wing-emblazoned nose southward down the unending straight into Heavenridge—past Sam Smallfield's house standing four-square on its eminence, past the Gables, and Gallop Mile, and the Institute, and the Duck, and with a last triumphant paean on its twin horns into the cobbled yard of Heavenridge railway station. The wheels had scarcely ceased turning when a tall, thin, overcoated figure detached itself from the shadowy bulk of the station buildings and came towards them.

"Ah, John," said Conway lazily. "Anything happened while we were away? Nobody murdered? And did you get my messages, about meeting the 11.18 from Redhill, and keeping a close watch on the houses of all concerned, to see who is away from home this moonlight night?"

"I did," said Williamshaw. "The train's about due now. She's just been signalled."

"How many men have you got, John? This animal may be dangerous, you know. Also, it's a downy bird, if ever I knew one."

"There are a dozen of us here. And Mr. Winterset's platoon of the Home Guard has very kindly consented to turn out, in panoply of arms, and has dispersed itself in what I am bound to say is a most impressive manner, all round this yard, and the sidings, and across the road yonder. I think Miss Cumber, if she is still alive and well and in your company, should go at once into the waiting-room."

A thin and querulous whistle was borne to their ears on the soft wind.

"Thar she blows," said Conway. "Ann—in you go, my gal, and no nonsense, please. Arnold, take this gun. Wait till you see the whites of his eyes roll up into his head. We'll go into the booking-hall. . . ."

Their footsteps boomed hollowly on the unstained board flooring as they tramped inside. Ann vanished into the waiting-room. Whispering, naked gas-jets cast a yellow light on the corridor-like space between the door opening to the yard and the door opening to the platforms.

"This," said Conway in low tones, "is the pay-off. He's on this train, John, I'll swear he is—and he must, for his neck's sake, get safely home tonight. I suppose you know by now who he is?"

Williamshaw, leaning against the wall to one side of the door, his hands in his overcoat pockets, shook his head slowly.

"I hadn't enough men to cover the houses of all your suspects, and make sure of this rendezvous as well," he murmured. The train arrived, splendidly, to an accompaniment of hissing steam and grinding wheels, and a brief, ruddy glare from the engine-driver's cab as it passed the closed door glazed in ground glass. Doors slammed. Footsteps crunched. A swift wind came in as the door to the platform swung wide. The view of three pairs of straining eyes was momentarily obscured by a moving pillar of steam entering the narrow confines of the booking-hall and filling it from floor to ceiling before dissipating silently and dramatically to reveal, blinking in the glare of the gaslight, old Mrs. Leathers, followed by two stridently laughing girls; behind these a strong, familiar voice was heard crying "*Hello, Tom! Didn't know you were on the train!*" and the tall, powerful frame of James de Forrest Fosdyke filled impressively the aperture of the doorway for an instant, from lintel to lintel. He stood there, and his black and glittering eyes stared directly at Conway beyond his high-held nose.

"*Hello, Conway!*" he cried, and stepped backwards and sideways, treading rather heavily on Williamshaw's demure black shoes; he turned in surprise to apologize. Tom Clarke, pulling on new-looking gloves of tan leather, strolled in behind Fosdyke, his face smiling.

"'Evening, Conway,'" he said, and stepped aside, next to the barrister. "Can I give anybody a lift up the road? Got the car waiting."

Through the door in procession came Charlie Todd, two Canadian gunners slightly alcoholized and insanely cheerful of demeanour, Sir Benet and Lady Caulfield in full regalia of evening attire, a shy boy of fourteen, Dr. Heavibody, a white-bearded old chap supporting enfeebled steps with a strangely contorted

walking-stick, Sam Smallfield, and two women with bulging shopping baskets.

"Ill-met, by moonlight," said Conway, remembering a remark of Fosdyke's.

"How d'you mean?" asked J.F.F.

"Nothing, nothing," said Conway, watching Williamshaw. The superintendent's dark eyes were downcast. "Where do we go from here, Superintendent? Folks, meet Superintendent John Williamshaw, C.I.D. Down here on a rather important case. Dr. Heavibody. Mr. Smallfield, partner of the late Charles Ranaldshaw. Mr. Fosdyke. Sir Benet Caulfield. Lady Caulfield. Mr. Tom Clarke of Gallop Mile. The redfaced chappie who walked out just now was Charlie Todd. Well, there you have it, Superintendent. A suspiration of suspects, or something. I think," said Conway with suppressed violence, "that I'll take up chess again, seriously. I don't seem any good at this detection, any more. I don't seem to *get* anywhere."

"Pray don't upset yourself, Sir Brian," said Williamshaw with an elaborate affectation of concern. "All this can be quite simply explained, I'm perfectly sure, if we could all meet somewhere and sit down quietly for an hour or so. I feel we owe it to all concerned to give them the fullest details."

Ann Cumber came out from her enforced habitation, and stood next to Arnold.

"Couldn't it be tonight, Superintendent?" asked Lady Caulfield in a voice used to carrying three fields at the dramatic moments in a hunt. "I'm sure we shall all sleep the more soundly for knowing the truth at last, about all this wretched affair."

"Hear, hear," said Sir Benet.

"Glad if you'd come along to my place, I'm sure," said Tom Clarke.

"You know," said Sam Smallfield with open vowels, "Ah think he was waiting here, at the station, for the murderer!"

"I'd love to come," said J.F.F.

Dr. Heavibody made the sort of sound usually associated with a Sussex white boar when he roots about under oak-trees on his own private concerns and becomes aware of the near propinquity of human beings; an equivocal sound. . . .

And thus it came about that presently all these people found themselves gathered, in a silence of great awe and mutual mis-

comprehension, amid the worn magnificence of Tom Clarke's spacious drawing-room, stared down at by the canvas likenesses of Tom Clarke's hard-riding and harder-drinking ancestors. They were joined by Georgette Cumber, Inspector Goodman and Detective-Inspector Thrust—the last two sitting with notebooks on their knees and pencils poised like earnest students of an extension course for adults. All were served with drinks by a manservant of advanced years; he withdrew, closing the tall double doors softly behind him.

"I ought to begin," said Williamshaw, sunk in the deeps of a saddleback armchair, his face propped on one bony hand, "by telling you two things, in confidence. A very important Government agent has been living for some time in this neighbourhood under the name of Mortenson. Some of you may have met him socially. He was disguised, because he was a rather well-known French criminal, before the war, named Michel. I have now received from Scotland Yard a letter signed by Mortenson, addressed to me at my office, which gives a complete and consistent account of all the events which have so shocked you all. It lacks nothing in circumstantial detail, and there can be no reasonable doubt that it was written by someone who was personally and intimately concerned in the murders of Mr. Ranaldshaw, his nephew, and his nephew's servant, as well as with the attempts to murder Mr. Winterset, Sir Brian Conway, and Detective-Inspector Thrust. I propose to read it to you, omitting only such portions as are by their nature likely to violate the Official Secrets Act."

Williamshaw mounted upon his nose a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles and began to read from certain folded sheets.

"... The fact that this Ranaldshaw was to me personally a danger in my capacity as a patriot I did not think much of. It was more that his death was to me a spiritual necessity. I, Michel, could not in honour let him live longer, whom he had not only injured but dishonoured. For *cher* Williamshaw there is honour even among such thieves as I. I killed him therefore. But also there was the money. That was mine by right. I possessed myself of it, and in this I was crossed by the nephew Cumber. Him also I killed and made an endeavour that his death should seem to be the result of remorse afflicting him after killing his own uncle. Later I was even forced into attempting to remove certain other persons, not by myself but through enlisting the services of those poor unfortunates who were forced at all times to do my bidding. I did not then know that Sir Brian and the detective were your

own friends, but after I knew this I desisted from them, and there were to be no more deaths save that of the servant of Cumber, which you may believe was an accident of the gun going off. Certainly he would not stand aside as bidden, and in the *mélée* he was shot. Your officers were very close at hand at that time, and I could not risk discovery when on the eve of departing. All this is true *cher* Williamshaw. This was the manner of it, for your detective interest.

" 'I called on John Cumber in his office, asking for him by name after first calling him outside to meet me for five minutes only. Thus I knew he would not be in but would have left an instruction that he would be shortly back. It is an old trick, that. While on the premises I quickly substituted for the old fellow's aspirins a similar bottle but containing a very dangerous dose manufactured of white arsenic. You see, I knew his habits, to a letter T.

" 'I entered the house late on Saturday night, after calling with my bottle of rheumatism cure for the poor old gentleman's complaint. It was harmless, that cure. I entered by the open bedroom window of the deaf old lady. You may trust Michel at this sort of work. I was in time to see the old gentleman die and to leave a note by his bedside. Then I recovered from the safe those notes and securities which that thief had stolen from me, his precious nephew supporting the outrageous robbery, and I left by the way I had entered. I made rendezvous with the nephew so that he should be in the neighbourhood and have no alibi for the crime. We met. I could not, however, contain my passions, and at the finish I killed him. I tried to make it seem a suicide. I saw the pale-faced young man looking into the car and hid below the seat. Him I had seen before and was aware of his motions. I had driven, you understand, in my car to Fosdyke Dyke on the road to that chalk-pit for the rendezvous, and seeing the car of that charming Mrs. Cumber standing discreetly in shadow there, I proceeded in her car after parking my own. Thus I left John Cumber in his wife's car, and crossing at once the fields to my own car, drove home to telephone to Gibbs at Brighton. Him I instructed as to the removal of the body to Cumber's house, and the elimination of the young man in spectacles. I do not think my instructions were at all properly carried out, although Gibbs and his creatures had always to obey Michel without question. I saw him at my house, and gave him an exact description of the victim.

" 'When I heard how those pigs had failed me I can assure you I was furious. I wanted to come on the people at Gallop Mile to find out what they might be discussing, and I was in the wood when the bomb came down. I endeavoured then to make amends for the failure of Gibbs, but your black Irishman has the head of iron. I thought the hand-grenade would do my trick, too, but this time it was the thin Home Guard and his confounded cricketing experience. After that I gave up, I can tell you. But Gibbs had deposited Cumber in the woods near his home and driven Mrs. Cumber's car back to Fosdyke Dyke, so I endeavoured to make the body repose more naturally in the library there, which is how the gatekeeper most unfortunately lost his life. When later that morning I saw the thin one riding by I had an impulse to follow him, but I lost him somehow. Those policemen gave Michel his first real fright, though I do not think upon reflection that they were really on my trail at all. I got rid of all my recovered cash and securities through the usual channels which are ever open to one of my fraternity and now I am leaving your England for ever *cher* Williamshaw. It would be curious, would it not, if all my endeavours for the Allies were to give me a kind of immunity for all these offences in England, but I do not care to risk it. If however you should wonder why I am giving you all the information about the murders I will tell you perfectly frankly that I do not think you can catch up with Michel any more than you could have solved the mystery without my help, and it is on my conscience that those excellent people in Heavenridge who are not enemies of mine at all should continue to be subjected to unpleasantness and suspicion. Although I tried hard to kill some of them, that was to stave off discovery so that I could continue to play the good game against the real enemy in France. When I saw that they were your friends I desisted. That is all now except to tell you as a final challenge that I go to America by route K, and to inform you that on my last mission to Berlin . . . ' I must stop there, I fear," said Williamshaw. "The rest of this surprising document is highly confidential, and doesn't concern the murders in the least. I will tell you, however, that the revelations it contains are no less startling than those to which you have been kind enough to give your attention. Now, Thrust, what is your opinion, as the only one among us who ever knew Michel in his real character, of this confession of his?"

"Might have been the chap talking, sir," said Thrust promptly. "It was his very speech, sir. Boastful, Frenchy talk, like I've had

to listen to by the hour in my time. You may remember I was kept prisoner by Michel for nearly a week once, at that villa in Passy, until he thought it was safe to let me go—when I was over in France to try to give the Sûreté a hand.”

“Yes,” said Williamshaw, thoughtfully, “I remember. And as I have already said, there can be no reasonable doubt in our minds, as there could certainly be none in the minds of a jury, that this account has been written by one who had intimate and personal knowledge of these distressing murders. What is your opinion, Sir Brian?”

“Not the slightest doubt,” said Conway, quietly.

“Good,” said Williamshaw, moving his long legs into a more comfortable position. “I think, then,” Williamshaw went on casually, “that we can accept Michel’s version of the murders as a true one, and bring a difficult case to an end as far as investigations in this country are concerned——”

Conway’s head jerked up.

“—Except,” Williamshaw went on—“except for one small circumstance.”

Conway had been smoking so furiously that his head was shrouded in blue clouds. He took out his pipe and spoke in a strong voice.

“What would that be, John?”

“Michel couldn’t write,” said Williamshaw. . . .

“Because of the disguise which it was necessary for Mortenson, or Michel, to adopt while working against the Germans,” the Superintendent went on, “it was unfortunately possible for his identity to be assumed with really extraordinary success. It was possible for a murderer to carry out all these acts in Mortenson’s very person, as it were—to throw police suspicions finally with unmistakable emphasis on Mortenson, and at a convenient moment to arrange for Mortenson to disappear . . . especially if he had taken the precaution of murdering Mortenson first.

“Apart from the natural mistake he made through not knowing, as I knew after working with him while disguised, that Mortenson was almost entirely uneducated in the scholastic sense of that word, and was illiterate in English, our murderer made a second blunder. He was so unwise as to wish to find out how far our investigations at Mortenson’s house had taken us (or, which I think more likely, to try to recover a piece of incriminating evidence left behind him there). He showed himself briefly; he exchanged shots with the police; he fled; he returned at length to

this hospitable roof to listen to my fascinating recital. He is here in this room with us, now."

The superintendent lifted to his lips and briefly tasted a small glass of brown sherry. He set the glass down, sighed lightly, leaned back in his chair with the tips of his long and bony fingers just resting together, and looked up at the ceiling with dark and melancholy eyes.

"I really ought now to warn the murderer," he murmured, "that anything we may say, during our discussion this evening, may be written down and may be used in evidence. For discuss it we must. I am vested with—er—rather extraordinary powers in this case, and I shall use them, because my time is very limited, to make sure that we get everything cleared up before any of us leave this house tonight."

"We're goin' to the races tomorrow," said J.F.F. "How d'you suppose you're likely to be able to stop us, Superintendent? I think you're bluffin'."

"I'll bring up enough men to take the whole party to gaol for the night, and have the case brought before a bench of magistrates who will commit you, despite any application for bail, on a writ I hold from the King's Bench Division, to be held during His Majesty's pleasure. I will then have my interrogations carried out in Court until I have enough evidence to prefer a murder charge. The alternative, as I say, is for us to sit down here and discuss it all now, in comfort."

"I see," said Fosdyke in chastened tones. "I see. Deary, deary me! Let's get on with it, I say."

One by one, each according to his or her manner, the rest of the company signified agreement.

Williamshaw listened to them all gravely, with a gentle inclination of his dark head as each affirmative utterance floated out into the still air of the room. His head remained drooped; he seemed to be listening; far, far away, the sharp and punctuating note, almost like a faint noise heard in the head, of gunfire could be heard on the Sussex downs.

"Yes," he said, almost absently, "yes. Now, I want to be perfectly frank with you all. I don't want anyone—least of all the murderer—to be even ever so faintly under the impression that I am in any way being anything other than perfectly fair. I'm not, let me assure you, trying to trap any of you into admissions of any kind, for example. But if this was a detective story, and all of us here were gathered together, as it were

fortuitously, for a grand finale to a mystifying narrative—why, it would be rather easy for the detective, the author's pet creation, the—er—the know-all, to say which one of you was the murderer."

He stopped, and groped in his jacket pocket for a perfectly enormous briar pipe, black with age, curved, holding about three-quarters of an ounce, and began to fill it from a tattered rubber pouch with thick and slightly sticky strands of pure Latakia tobacco; it was John Williamshaw's ritual smoke, his once-a-week pipe, strong and redolent. He lit up with delicate white fingers working at the tobacco under the very flame of the lighted match.

Sir Brian Dinsmore Conway, 13th Baronet, K.C., D.S.O., 63rd Chief of Clonmally (The Conway of the Clon), gazed at the saturnine superintendent through eyes narrowed against the blue-grey drift of his own, practically perpetually alight, pipe; he gazed with a certain fondness, and with a certain despair.

"How do you mean—*easy*?" he growled, the burr of the lonely west of Ireland just tincturing his speech. "Admitted that new brooms sweep clean, and all that, do you really mean that a problem which has taxed Thrust, and Goodman, and me, for days past, is to you no problem at all? That we have been fumbling inexpertly with facts susceptible not of several explanations but of one only, while the truth gleamed before us unrecognizable? These are bold words of yours, John Williamshaw. Can you make them good?"

"Oh, dear," murmured John Williamshaw. "I had no intention at all of saying anything bold. Will you allow me to recite the plain facts?"

"I will," said Conway, and settled back into the deeps of his chair upholstered in smooth-worn leather.

"Charles Shadforth Winter Ranaldshaw," intoned the superintendent in his voice of a Nonconformist teacher of Sunday school, "died by poison which we can assume was taken in mistake for his normal nightly dose of aspirin tablets. Someone, the murderer in fact and in law, substituted tablets of arsenic for the tablets of aspirin. When? At some time between the purchase of the aspirin from a chemist's shop in Bond Street on the Friday afternoon and the time of Ranaldshaw's retirement in his bedroom on the following Saturday night. Who had access to the bottle during these operative times? Apparently, of the people under suspicion, Mr. Winterset, Mr. Charles Todd, chauffeur and handyman, and Mrs. Cumber, who called on the old man at his office on Friday

afternoon to ask for the cheque which on Saturday she cashed in Heavenridge. John Cumber could also have tampered with the bottle, as he was in the office that day. And he alleged Mr. Mortenson called to see John Cumber at the office, and could conceivably have done so, too. Next, the bottle of aspirins was put back on the old man's bedside table after he had taken the lethal dose of arsenic. Who could have made this substitution? Apparently, only Mr. Charles Todd. The other suspects all have quite good alibis for the time after the bridge-game in this house, and before the discovery of the body on Sunday morning. But Mr. Mortenson has no such alibi, for the simple reason that it has formed no part of the police activities to ask him for one. Note, in passing, that Mr. Mortenson also intervenes in connection with a bottle of rheumatism cure handed to Mr. Fosdyke for the old man, and of which the old man took a fairly large dose on the evening of his death. Upon examination, this bottle was found to contain a deadly mixture of arsenic. But that mixture was so strong that in point of fact it seems very doubtful if it could possibly have been taken by Charles Ranaldshaw without immediate signs of distress—whereas all the evidence is that he returned home, prepared for bed in the normal way, and retired, without any symptoms of poisoning manifesting themselves. Therefore it appears we have two kinds of substitution to consider. We have the substitution of one bottle of apparent aspirins for another bottle of apparent aspirins, and the substitution of one bottle of apparent rheumatism mixture for another bottle of apparent rheumatism mixture. With this interesting difference—that whereas, on the one hand, *poisoned* tablets were put in the place of a harmless drug, and a harmless drug later put back in the place of those poisoned tablets, after death had supervened from the taking of the poisoned tablets—on the other hand, a *harmless* mixture was put forward, and a *poisoned* mixture was later substituted for it, after the death due to taking the tablets had taken place. I find this *very* interesting. The people who could have substituted the poisoned mixture for the innocuous mixture include Mr. Fosdyke, Mrs. Cumber, Mr. Smallfield, Miss Cumber, Sir Benet Caulfield, but not apparently Mr. Mortenson."

When Williamshaw paused, at this point, to relight his pipe, it seemed momentarily to Arnold that very hazily and indistinctly, in the far recesses of his mind, there began to awaken a glimmer of intelligence . . . he began to foresee, without any real clarity and certainly without being able to put a name to it, the

identity of the murderer towards whom Williamshaw's exposition was leading him. . . .

"It's all a matter, really," murmured the superintendent, puffing powerfully, "of arranging the facts we know in the right order. Take next the second manifestation of murderous intent in this case, apart from the attempts on Mr. Winterset by obvious hirelings. I mean the incident in the wood here at Gallop Mile. Who could have delivered those blows at Mr. Winterset and Sir Brian during the excitement of the fire-fighting? Certainly Mr. Fosdyke, Mr. Smallfield, Sir Benet, Mr. Todd, Mrs. Cumber, and Miss Cumber—and it seems equally certainly, not Mr. Mortenson. Then, the attempt in the chalk-pit. There we seem to have to exonerate all the suspects, since Sir Benet was telephoning the War Office, Mrs. Cumber was at the hairdresser's, Mr. Fosdyke and Mr. Smallfield were together, in a field not far from the pit, and Miss Cumber was with Mr. Clarke. Where Mr. Mortenson was, we don't know. Oh, and Mr. Todd was driving his late employer's car into Heavenridge. But one of these alibis may well have been faked—and indeed, it comes to this, that one of them must have been faked if we assume that someone, throughout a large part of the time, was impersonating Mr. Mortenson.

"Finally, the really extraordinary sequence of events at the Acorns, residence of the late Mr. Cumber; someone undoubtedly brought John Cumber's body back to Acorns, intending to place it in the empty house; he was interrupted, and a loyal servant died in consequence of that interruption. We know fairly certainly that Mr. Fosdyke, Miss Cumber and Mrs. Cumber were on the scene, as was Mr. Winterset, who went there with Sir Brian. Sir Benet, at that time, was calling at Fosdyke Dyke; Mr. Smallfield was at home. Again, we don't know where Mr. Mortenson was, or rather, we don't know where the apparent Mr. Mortenson was. But we do know that through all these events, we mustn't be misled into looking for any other alibis than *alibis for being where Mr. Mortenson was*; that is, the question we must continually ask is this: where was each suspect at the time when Mr. Mortenson could have been doing all these misdeeds? Could any of them possibly have been impersonating Mr. Mortenson at those times?

"I have given you the alleged Mr. Mortenson's own explanation of events, enshrined in a document sent to me at the Yard, and purporting to be a confession. It is nothing if not specific—about times, places, methods, everything. So specific

that I believe you will be bound in reason to accept it as largely true. To me, at all events, it rings true, and, of course, if it *is* true, then it was written by the murderer himself, who was obviously in the best position to clear up any doubtful points for us. The only thing wrong with it, from the police standpoint, is that it was *not* written by the real Mr. Mortenson, though the writer must have been sure that the police would unhesitatingly believe that it was.

"Now let us see where this leads us. It gives us, I think, what I would call a substantive version of events, quite independent of inferences, as such. We can now say with some certitude, thus and thus, these events *must* have happened. Who among us was most able to contrive them?"

A complete stillness in the big room was interrupted only by the steady ticking of a big old clock in the corner.

"Sir Benet Caulfield, or Mr. Fosdyke, or Mr. Smallfield, or Charlie Todd, acting singly or in combination, could have contrived them," continued the superintendent. "Acting as Mortenson, one of these it was who substituted arsenic for aspirin, and left at this house a harmless bottle of rheumatism cure. Acting as Mortenson, one of these gained admittance to Mr. Ranaldshaw's room, removed the valuables, and placed there the death-note. One of these, also, replaced that harmless mixture with a highly lethal dose—but not then acting as Mortenson. One of these made the attack in the wood and one of these threw the grenade—whether acting as Mortenson or not, at those times, we don't know. Nor do we know whether it was in his own identity, or acting as Mortenson, that one of these gave the instructions to Gibbs and his gang. Finally, one of these—and very probably acting as Mortenson because of the fearful risk he ran—tried to return John Cumber's body to Acorns. Tonight, one of these appeared at Mortenson's house and was pursued by Sir Brian as far as Redhill, and came here on the 11.18 train."

"Very pretty, John," said Conway irresponsibly. "We may well determine thus the identity of the murderer—indeed, I think it is by now pretty apparent who he is—but how do you imagine any of this is going to help in proving his guilt?"

"He may confess," said Williamshaw mildly, bringing his dark gaze down from the ceiling and turning it on the barrister, inscrutably.

"Damn it all——" began Fosdyke loudly.

"If you want to know what I think——" said Sam Smallfield,

getting up from his chair, striding into the centre of the room, and waving a lighted cigar.

"I say," cried Sir Benet Caulfield on a rising tenor note, sitting very slim and upright and looking very martial, "I *sây*——"

"Darling!" exclaimed Georgette Cumber and Lady Caulfield, simultaneously, so that their respective lovers subsided and left Sam Smallfield the floor.

"I've got," said he, "as much patience as most folks, but there's one thing I must make quite clear. 'Tisn't nice, for anyone, being accused of murder, especially when it's your lifelong friend and business partner, and another partner, and an innocent servant—to say nowt at all about hiring a gang of blackguards to murder yet other people. But of course, I quite realize the police have their job to do, same as anyone else, and for all I know this may just be your war of nerves, like. But before you can possibly bring a *charge* of murder you must surely be able to show some sort of motive! What I mean," said Sam Smallfield, getting redder and redder, "folks don't just go murdering other folks, without rhyme or reason. *I* had no motive at all—none. And by what I've heard, both Fosdyke and Caulfield here had considerable motive, as commonly understood. About Charlie Todd, I don't know—except he may very well have been in with 'em."

"Oh, motive," said Conway. "The motive I'm looking at, all this time, is the motive for murdering Michel."

"Michel?" barked Sir Benet, almost quite exasperated. "The chap Mortenson? Who says he *was* murdered? What *is* all this, eh? Damn and blast it all—I *really* beg your pardon, ladies!"

"The motive which I am most interested in," said Williamshaw, "is undoubtedly the motive for the murder of John Cumber. Do you think that the murderer's own version of the motive for it, in this faked confession of Michel's, is at all convincing? I must say I don't. However, let us keep to the business of the meeting, shall we? I propose to show you not only how we can be sure who the murderer is, but how we can prove it. Indeed, if the reasoning on which our knowledge of his identity is based is at all sound, it would constitute a case against him—even if we hadn't secured an interesting piece of direct evidence. This consists of nothing more sensational than a perfect set of fingerprints. I don't want to bore you—it has become fashionable to discount fingerprints, simply because those who go in for

premeditated crime just don't leave any, any more. On the other hand, there are only two ways readily to avoid doing so—by carefully wiping them off, or by wearing gloves. And often, a criminal in the course of his professional activities must perform actions which preclude the latter course. Everything may then well turn on the care with which he wipes off any prints he may make. In this case, the murderer—and the murderer alone—could have left this very perfect set of prints. They were such that they couldn't be wiped off, and as a matter of fact they were rather difficult to destroy, even if he noticed them."

"They must have been found in Mortenson's house," said Conway. "That's the one place where none of the suspected people had any innocent reason to be! And also, all that carefully arranged evidence goes to show that nobody but Mortenson and Mrs. Plummet had been there, for weeks past."

"Exactly. It was there that the prints were found. And I rather think that the guilty person returned there, tonight, because he had remembered the possibility of the prints being there."

"The carbon paper!" exclaimed Arnold, his agile mind having canvassed with dizzy speed the whole contents of Mr. Mortenson's house. Williamshaw's black gaze conveyed respect.

"A very near miss," he said. "It was the typewriter ribbon. He must have had some trouble with it, and no doubt the mental trauma it occasioned him quite put his mind off the possibility that he had left prints there. He could scarcely have attended to it while wearing gloves . . . it is really extraordinary," and Williamshaw's tone became almost animated, "the way murderer after murderer, in my experience, will go over and over in his brain, after the commission of a carefully-thought-out crime, every detail of his actions, scrutinizing them to convince himself that he has forgotten nothing, overlooked nothing. And of course, as a corollary to this process there is the way he will—er—stick his neck out, when he should sit tight and hope for the best, in order to put right something that strikes him as having gone slightly wrong. Detective-Inspector Thrust's methodical search uncovered this literally fatal slip."

"Not literally *fatal*, Superintendent Williamshaw," said Ann Cumber with earnest irrelevance. "Literally, that would mean preordained by Fate. I rather think you mean *deadly*."

"Deadly, yes. Thank you."

"It's dogged as does it," growled Inspector Goodman half to

himself, as he contemplated in his inner mind the triumph of those orthodoxies of police routine which he held sacred.

"He made a lot of mistakes, really," said Conway. "The death-note, for example. Remember?"

Arnold turned slightly in his chair so that he could unobtrusively contrive a quick scrutiny of each of three faces illumined by the bland light of Tom Clarke's high-hung inverted ceiling-bowl. It fell impartially on Sir Benet's pointed, vivacious profile like a terrier's on the leash, on Sam Smallfield's red, honest, troubled countenance, and on James de Forrest Fosdyke's dark, masterful features. All were still as mice, Sam Smallfield still in arrested motion half-way across the room, his cigar still held forward and alight, the knight upright in his high-backed chair, J.F.F. lounging in an armchair with his head sunk forward on his powerful chest.

"Actually," said Tom Clarke, flicking ash from his cigarette, "at the time when this feller Mortenson, or his speaking likeness, appeared at the offices of Ranaldshaws Limited, Mr. Fosdyke and Sir Benet were in Heavenridge. On the Friday, I mean."

"So was I, man," said Sam Smallfield. "I came back from Nottingham. I was up at the house."

"I didn't see you, old boy," said Tom Clarke, apologetically.

"Nobody saw you," said Thrust, jutting his great jaw, "not even your servants, to swear to."

"When—when—Mr. Ranaldshaw was—dying," said Georgette Cumber in a trembly voice, "Mr. Fosdyke was—with me. At Fosdyke Dyke," she added almost in a whisper.

J.F.F.'s great brown hand shot out and closed over hers.

"My husband," said Lady Caulfield with emphasis, "was definitely with me. I remember I had to dress his sciatica."

"I was up at the house," said Sam Smallfield.

"But nobody saw you," said Thrust.

"Only Mr. Smallfield or Mr. Fosdyke could possibly have chucked that bomb into the chalk-pit," observed Arnold. "They were the only ones near enough."

"Only Mr. Smallfield or Sir Benet could have arrived by car at Acorns that night," said Conway. "J.F.F. was there already."

"Mr. Smallfield, Sir Benet, or Mr. Fosdyke could all have coshed you and Mr. Winterset in the wood," said Thrust.

"And how about our little excursion and alarum tonight?" pursued Conway relentlessly. "What, for example, were you a-doing of on the 11.18, J.F.F.?"

"Dentist," said J.F.F., displaying a set of strong, well-cared-for teeth in a prompt smile. "And at the White Hart afterwards, drinking old ale. A very fine tope. And I can prove it, too. Also, I ran into Dr. Heavibody in the High Street, and went up to the station in his company."

"Sir Benet?"

"My wife and I," said the soldier, "went to the pictures. Poor show. Awful horses. Here are the little half-portions of tickets they give you back. I got 'em out of my overcoat pocket, half expectin' somethin' of this sort. And if it happens to be of interest, Charlie Todd was there, too, in the elevenpennies. Oh, and we met the Cullinghams, in the foyer place, when we all turned out. About 10.30, I should think."

"Mr. Smallfield?"

"I was coming from Merstham. I changed at Redhill for Heavenridge. *And* I can prove it."

"I bet you can," said the barrister, under his breath.

"This is all moonshine, you know," went on Sam Smallfield easily. "I've already pointed out there was no conceivable motive on my part."

Thrust leaned far forward in his chair, his jaws moving, and stared at the bluff Yorkshireman.

"Blackmail," he pronounced slowly.

Sam Smallfield's ruddy face went quite horribly white. He did not move, except to bring his cigar slowly to his lips; its end glowed suddenly scarlet as he drew on it strongly and lingeringly. Thrust, still watching him intently, gave a loud exclamation and jumped clear to the middle of the room. At the same moment, Fosdyke rose massively and in one giant stride interposed himself between Thrust and Smallfield. The latter seemed to remain quite still for several seconds, during which Thrust and J.F.F. seemed each to be trying clumsily to get out of the other's way. Nobody else stirred. And then Sam Smallfield lurched wildly; he staggered several paces across the carpet, went rigid, his neck upstretched as if fighting for air, his chalky face becoming purple and veined. At last he fell quite heavily from his whole height, and lay face down on the floor. The cigar, still alight, was under his cheek. Fosdyke stepped forward, and stooped over him. Dr. Heavibody had risen, and pushed Fosdyke away.

"Get him on a bed, upstairs somewhere, to the devil out of this," he growled.

"Sorry, Detective-Inspector," said Fosdyke, staring at

Thrust. "I can see now what you were tryin' to do. There was a capsule of some sort in the hand that held his cigar."

"What were *you* trying to do, sir?" demanded Thrust ominously.

"I? Why, bless you, I was just tryin' to leave the room. To the thing, you know. The gentlemen's."

With complete effrontery he continued to stare unsmiling down into Thrust's furiously angry face.

"You can never get the police to see it, but it's probably far better this way," said Conway in a low voice.

"Perhaps," sighed Williamshaw. "And this is a very unusual case, after all. There are complications which would make a trial a most delicate business, I fear."

Thrust looked at his respected—nay, almost venerated—chief with a good deal of suspicion.

"I—I rather thought you were—leading him on, sir," he growled.

Fosdyke shepherded the women away. Conway said quickly:

"What's all this about blackmail? You've been withholding information from your close collaborator."

"No, I haven't," said Thrust. "Bluff, it was. Pure bluff. And I told you it used to be one of Michel's lines of business. It was a damn' good guess, if you ask me."

The baronet drank with unction a long, strong drink.

"Know what I think?" he said. "I think Ranaldshaw had something on Smallfield. Probably a smuggling affair. He may have heard Michel touching Smallfield. That ruthless old devil would make nothing of squeezing his partner, given a chance like that. So Smallfield—a strong man, you know: look how he held out tonight until he was absolutely sure—simply decided to remove Michel, first, for the purpose of adopting his disguise. It would only be for a day or two, you see. No strong man *can* be blackmailed. Then he bumped off the old man exactly as described in that 'confession'. He probably realized too late the mistake about the pen, and went ahead to eliminate John Cumber by direct action. I believe John Cumber had tumbled to it that he was acting as Mortenson, and was in on the murder-plot against old Ranaldshaw. Cumber wanted to pin something unpleasant on Georgette by means of that cheque. It was Smallfield himself, after all, who put us wise to the fact that the forged cheque might have been Cumber's bit of dirty work."

"And it was very probably Smallfield, and not Michel at all,

who brought the Gibbs gang into the business," said Thrust.

"I think so, yes. And the harmless rheumatism mixture?"

"Intended to draw attention unmistakably to Mortenson. We might even have assumed that that was how the arsenic was administered. Smallfield was up here, afterwards, with the others, and could easily have substituted the poisoned bottle. It was left here."

"Surmise," said Williamshaw.

"Oh, agreed, agreed," said Sir Brian. "But we may never *know*, now, John."

"I suppose we don't want to know, really," said the superintendent, "unless that poor devil doesn't die—*now*."

Dr. Heavibody came into the room, shaking the floor with his slow tread.

"He's gone," he said, staring at them all from beneath frowning frosty eyebrows. "He only recovered for about three minutes—less, if anything. He made a statement. Goodman's got it all down. He was being blackmailed, by Michel and by Ranaldshaw too. He planned to get rid of both of 'em, but it seems Cumber came on him, actually disposin' of Michel's body, in the woods at the bottom of Smallfield's paddock, at night. What a scene, eh? No doubt you can find the place. And Cumber was all for the scheme, but wanted that forgery pinned on his wife before the guilt was fastened on the defunct Mortenson. Smallfield just calmly rubbed out Cumber too. He might just as well, while he was at it. Good for him, I say. Don't you glower at me like that, copper. You're the sort that must have a hangin', eh? Better the wrong feller than no feller. G-r-r-r! Whatever Smallfield was, he wasn't a blackmailer, see? And that's far worse than bein' a murderer, whatever the fool law says."

With large ostentation, Dr. Heavibody screwed into a sterilizing tube a deadly-looking hypodermic needle at which Conway stared with fascinated interest.

"That's that," said Dr. Heavibody, grinning toothily.

Williamshaw went out, with a brief nod, followed by Thrust.

"I think I'll go and see Ann, now," said Arnold, rather shyly.

"Come along, come along," cried Fosdyke, taking his arm, "do you realize, my boy, we're the joint heirs to a thunderin' great fortune? This is better than ever!"

They departed in company.

"H-r-r-r-rmph," uttered Sir Benet Caulfield. "Good night, gentlemen. Interestin' evenin', what? Don't blame that chap,

meself. I'd have shot the lot of 'em. Not *poison*, though, eh? Good night, good night!"

And Sir Benet departed to join his spouse.

"You old ——," said Conway softly, to Dr. Heavibody. "You done him in. You murdered Smallfield! But, man—there'll be an autopsy. Have to be. And an inquest!"

Dr. Heavibody locked his little black case and stood upright.

"I'll do the autopsy, cock," he answered, benignly. "And I'll be coroner at the bally inquest, too, won't I? Who's a better right, I'd like to know? An' what the hell are you talkin' about, anyway?"

THE END



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